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Fantasy & Science Fiction

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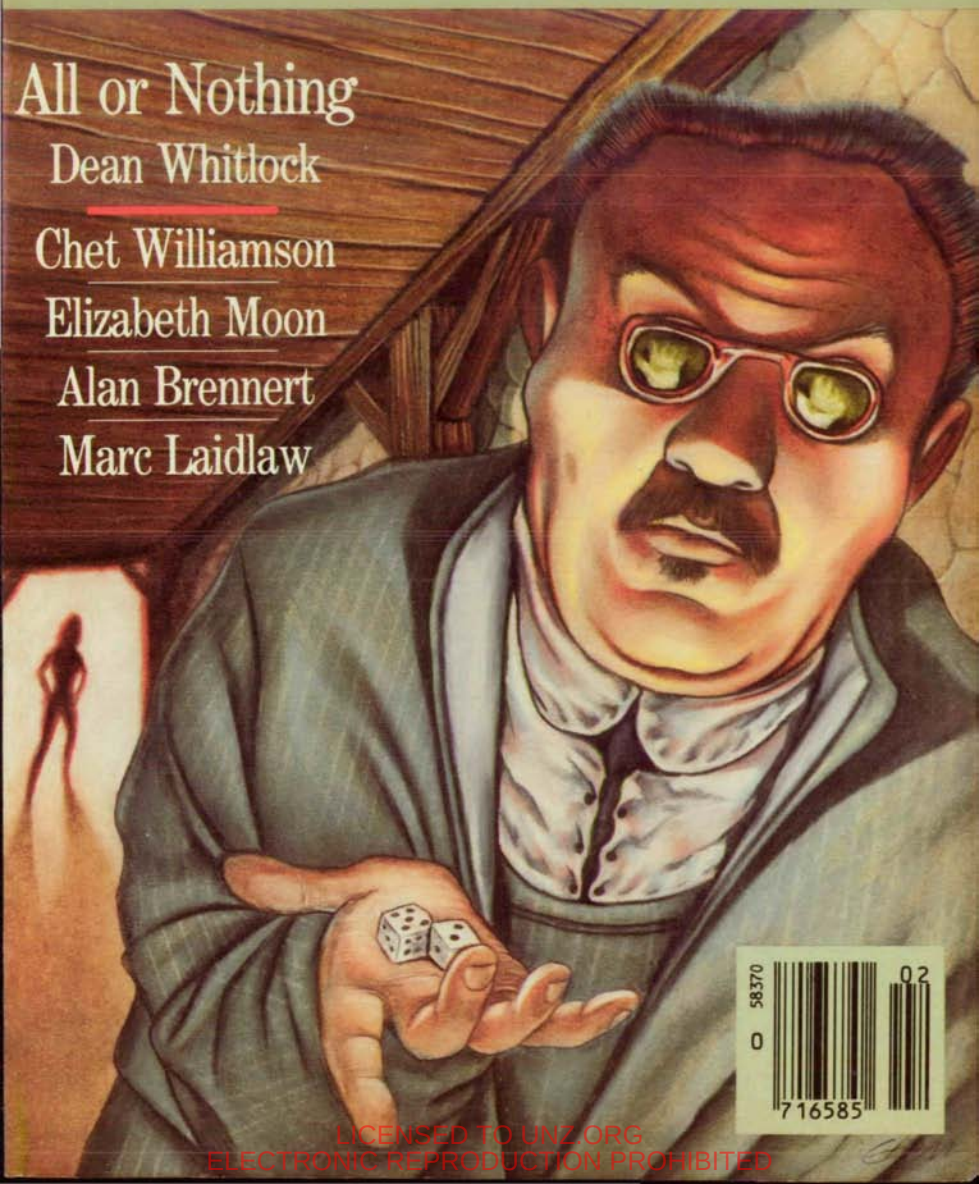
All or Nothing
Dean Whitlock

Chet Williamson

Elizabeth Moon

Alan Brennert

Marc Laidlaw



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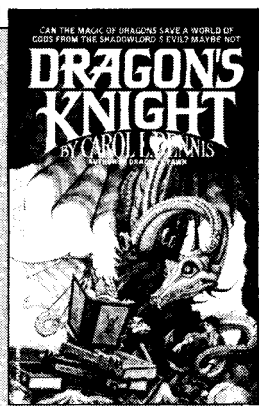

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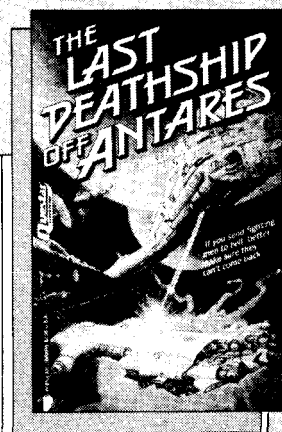

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A WORD FROM Brian Thomsen

Whenever it comes time for a year to end and another to begin I can't help but think of time. There is never enough time for work, for shopping, for seeing old friends, making new ones, reading books, etc. Time is my favorite paradox —it is infinite (or perhaps eternal is a better word), yet there is never enough of it.

January is a new beginning, and I like that. It's a second chance to move up, for a pawn to become a king (or maybe a knight if you're in the company of a dragon), or even the chance to regain something you've lost (maybe your freedom or dignity if you're a P.O.W. in an outerspace prison as in THE LAST DEATHSHIP OFF ANTARES.)

Well it's time to go, but when you see me around ask me what I really mean when I say CYTEEN is a big book (and I'm not just talking size).

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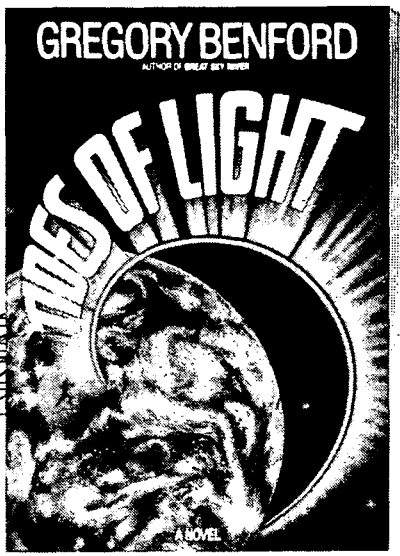

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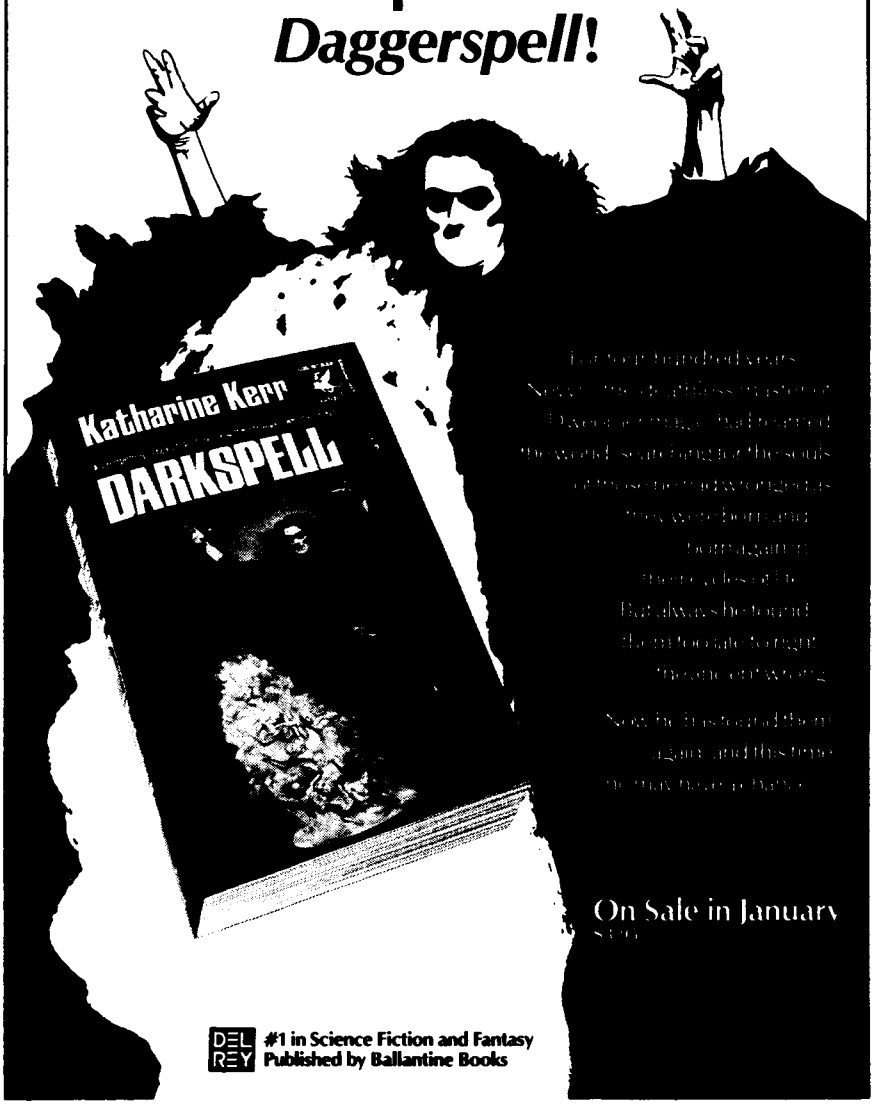

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The Magazine of Fantasy and Science Fiction (ISSN: 0024-984X), Volume 76, No. 2, Whole No. 453, Feb. 1989. Published monthly by Mercury Press, Inc. at $2.00 per copy. Annual subscription $21.00; $26.00 outside of the U.S. (Canadian subscribers: please remit in U.S. dollars or add 30%.) Postmaster: send form 3579 to Fantasy and Science Fiction, Box 56 Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Publication office, Box 56, Cornwall, Conn. 06753. Second class postage paid at Cornwall, Conn. 06753 and at additional mailing offices. Printed in U.S.A. Copyright © 1988 by Mercury Press, Inc. All rights, including translations into other languages, reserved. Submissions must be accompanied by stamped, self-addressed envelope. The publisher assumes no responsibility for return of unsolicited manuscripts.

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Dean Whitlock is not only one of our better new writers, he is also one of sf's more versatile authors, as demonstrated by this change of pace from his last story here ("Miriam, Messiah," January 1988). "All or Nothing" is an entirely satisfying, if not entirely serious tale about a spacer stranded on a planet whose natives are quite literally forked-tongue creatures who worship the God of Chance.

All or Nothing

By Dean Whitlock

WHEN I POPPED in over Halcyon, I was running on empty — no fuel, no credit, no plans. Nothing but Lady Luck and a hunch that this backwater candle and its one little dirtball would turn me a trick or two. After all, it was a name to inspire confidence. Halcyon. A good omen. I was willing to bet a lot on it.

My last client had turned out to be a bum deal. He shorted me on the payment, and when I complained, had the local constabulary chase me out of the system. New rule, Dulac — never trust a critter with a spaceship. Local law should end on the ground.

Now Halcyon's little rock sounded right. Lucky. That was its name: Lucky. Another good omen. A quick comp search told me the local critters were preindustrial, bipedal, and hungry. Sounded just ripe to buy a technology or two. They were ugly as sin, though: skinny, scaly critters with three fingers, big yellow eyes, a trace of tail, and — not good, Dulac — forked tongues. Not a good omen, at all.

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But beggars can't be choosers, and I was so close to begging, it didn't matter. As I drifted in toward Lucky, I put together an impressive portfolio for the local banker. Spacewarps being what they were, and Halcyon being where it was, I didn't think it would matter too much if I used last year's bank book. By the time anything could bounce, I'd have scored, paid off, and shipped out. If I was lucky.

The Fed had built a station in polar orbit, not much more than a spiderweb with a couple of bulbs on it. Not much crew, either, but lots of the usual critter watchers — ethnologists, linguists, like that. Students went there to study the natives and write papers for other students to read. I glibbed my way past the station master and the trade attaché, hit up the bank for some local coin, hired a translator, and headed dirtward.

I was lucky on the translator, an attractive postdoc named Sheila. She was new on the station, and looking for any excuse to get on the surface and gabble with the natives. She didn't even try to up my offer. I've been robbed by some translators, but what are you going to do? You need tongue surgery to talk some of those languages. And, of course, computers are illegal on the pretech worlds. So an inexpensive word worker who was also, tall, blue-eyed, and brunette seemed a lucky thing indeed.

It wasn't till we were in the shuttle and on the way down that Sheila admitted she was *very* new on the station. Like two months new. But she gabbled a phrase or two to show she was a quick study. Sounded fine to me, a lot of hisses and clicks with an occasional burp for emphasis.

"So what's it mean?" I asked her.

"Actually, it's a greeting," she said. "'May Chance grant you the grace of the wealthy.'"

"I'll take it," I said. "How's it go again?"

She repeated it for me, and I tried it out. A real tongue twister. Clickity-hiss click burp hisst tclick. Or something like that. She repeated it again, and I admired her mouth as she shaped the sounds. It's nice to watch someone who enjoys her work. It's also nice to watch full red lips.

That's when I noticed she also had a full red forked tongue. Literally. An interesting notion, but not a good omen.

"So what are these critters like?" I asked.

Her eyes turned ice cold.

"They are not 'critters,'" she said. "The Luckyites are Class Five Full

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Sentients with a grade-thirty technology and ethical boundaries rated at six-two on the Ri—"

"I know, I know," I said. "Forgive me. It was just a figure of speech."

"'Figures of speech' have been known to cause wars."

I let it drop. After all, I was hoping to get to know her better. There's nothing like a discussion of ethics to ruin a relationship.

She kept cool most of the way down, but when we got low enough to see things, she got excited and started pointing out details.

Lucky is young. It has one big continent broken by a couple of ranges of shield volcanoes. Active shield volcanoes, I will add. It has some pretty tough weather, too. Lots of thunder and lightning, bad droughts, torrential rains. You name it. All the towns were on the coast. Inland was just too rugged and hot.

There was one major city, sort of a world capital, with an unpronounceable name. We landed several miles away in the desert. There were a couple of natives waiting for the shuttle with boxy carts. No internal combustion, of course, and no legal way to sell it to them. Too advanced. Anyway, Sheila was twitching with glee. She went over to one critter and clicked away. He clicked back and bowed. Then he took a big coin out of his pocket, flipped it, checked it, and nodded. Sheila bowed back and waved me over.

"What was that all about?" I asked as we climbed into the cart.

"You mean with the coin?" she said. "She was just asking the God's favor to drive us."

"By flipping a coin?"

"Yes. They won't do anything without the God's favor."

"Which god is this?" I asked her.

"Actually, there's only one," she said. "Chance."

Sheila and I bounced along into town behind the driver and the plodding thing that pulled us. I noted that the plodding thing had four legs. Another good omen. The more Earth-like a planet is, the better chance I have of finding an angle. It takes time to psych out an alien mind and find a market. Humanesque aliens are easier.

In town, one thing hit me right away — crowds. The city was packed with people, jamming the roads, hanging out of the windows of the little mud buildings. We wound through the bodies and the alleys forever before we came anywhere near the center. And the center was something to

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see, a big, open square lined with shops and stalls on three sides, fronted by a big temple of some sort. The chief shrine and government center, I found out. And the natives were everywhere. I almost had to shout.

"Quite a crowd of crit— people," I said to Sheila.

The baby blues turned chilly again, but she nodded.

"It's like this everywhere," she said. "Population pressure is a real problem."

Interesting. "How so?" I asked her.

"Malthus," she said. "With a vengeance."

"Who?"

"Malthus. He was the first economist to predict that a population could outgrow its natural resources. They've got a bad case of it here."

"Why not give them birth control?" I asked.

"We tried," she said. "We got a Stay of Technological Imperative to make it legal and came up with a pill. But the natives wouldn't use it."

"Why not?"

"It's against their religion."

I took another look at the temple and wondered what other taboos I'd come up against. Religion and business usually didn't mix.

Sheila found us an inn near the center (good omen — they had inns). I suggested we share a room to save money, and Sheila didn't mind (even better omen, though not related to business). And dinner turned out to be edible. Roast something meaty with boiled hiss-click. A grain. But the portions were small by anyone's standard. No wonder the critters were so skinny. Maybe the angle was agriculture.

Despite the meager shares, Sheila left a goodly bit in her bowl.

"Not hungry?" I asked, eyeing her leftovers.

"Whatever's left is given to the beggars," she said. She gave me a wry look. "Unless you'd rather eat it."

"Oh no," I said. I leaned back in my chair and rubbed my stomach. "I need to lose a few anyway."

"Aliens like us can't appreciate what it means to go hungry," she said.

"Um," I replied. I think she took it for agreement. At least she stopped the lecture.

We made an early night of it. Sheila, it turned out, was not at all shy. She changed out of her coveralls into a light chemise that did little to hide her. Then she climbed into the narrow bed. I slipped out of my own

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uni, blew out the lamp, and sat down beside her.

"You must find it interesting, studying a culture so closely," I said. "When you're in Sales, like me, you don't have the time to really scope them out. Basic industries and the current need, that's all." I leaned on my hand, letting it press the side of her leg. "You get a chance to know them better."

"Critter sex, you mean?"

"Ah. . . ."

"As far as I know, the Luckyites don't have any." And she rolled over on her side and fell asleep.

Such was the favor of Chance.

THE NEXT morning, Sheila was all aquiver, gabbling away with anyone who wanted to talk. I didn't mind. It was better than the cold shoulder. And I had a lot of questions that only she could get answered. It seemed like her hissing was up to the task. We got lost only three times on the way to the market, and that didn't faze old Sheila. It gave her a chance to ask one of the natives for more directions. Maybe she got lost on purpose.

But we finally came out into the square surrounding the big temple. The crowds were thick there, busy folk around all the stalls, clicking away at each other and fingering the merchandise. And flipping their coins. Nobody but nobody closed a deal without consulting the deity.

We pushed our way to the temple door, and I studied the statue overhead. Chance was made in the critters' image, I saw, tongue and all. Only, it had two heads, with a smile on one side and a frown on the other.

"She's the central aspect of the whole way of life here," Sheila said. "The coins have the same faces, one on each side."

"You keep saying 'she,'" I said. "Is this a matriarchy or something.

Sheila looked at me funny. Then she laughed.

"They're all 'she,'" she told me. She waved her hand around at the crowd in the square. "All of them."

I looked around. It was true: I couldn't see any different sexes in the crowd, and they didn't wear much to hide their scaly privates. But how would I know what was private on a Luckyite?

"All female?" I asked. "How do they reproduce?"

"Parthenogenesis."

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"Oh no."

"Oh yes. Every one of them can produce viable eggs. And grow them to term. That's one reason why the population is such a problem."

Not good, Dulac, not good. I could only hope it wouldn't make them too difficult to understand. Worshiping Chance I could cope with. I did it all the time, myself. A world without gender was something else.

It was cool and dim in the temple. Just inside the doorway was a big stone bucket and a critter with a bigger knife. I was tempted to call it a sword. Everyone who came in flipped a coin — a smile went into the bucket; a frown went back into the pocket. The guard made sure. A chancy way to pick up donations, I thought.

Then Sheila took out a coin and flipped it. It came up frowns, but she dropped it into the bucket anyway. The guard bowed.

"Wasn't that an act of heresy?" I asked.

"They accept gifts," she said. "They need all they can get."

I looked around at the mosaics in the vaulted ceiling, the massive urns and chalices, the many oil lamps, apparently gilded.

"You'd have done better to give it to a beggar outside," I said. "I'd say the Church of Chance does well enough."

"I give to the beggars, too," she said. "It's little enough, given the famine that will come in a few years."

Back off, Dulac, I thought. She's gone gaga for these critters.

"So how do I meet the pope person?" I asked her. "The Grand Whatever. She's the one I'll have to deal with if I want to make anything out of this."

"Her Holiness," she said. "It's easy enough. Actually, she's more than happy to meet with alien salesmen. Last year, someone sold them wine-making."

I could tell from the tone of her voice that she didn't approve.

"Anything wrong with that?" I asked her.

"Not really, I guess. Just that they converted a lot of arable land over to the local equivalent of grapes. And they don't have a lot of arable land."

Gaga for sure.

She led me toward the back of the temple, past a big stone table about waist high and rimmed with a low stone fence. I looked in as we passed it. No bloodstains.

Then we ducked through a curtained doorway and into a narrow passage that led back to an anteroom. Another scaly guard clicked at us

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and led us farther back through the small and large rooms, past urns and statues and little alcoves with tiny, grilled windows, and finally into a large hall flanked by columns and fronted by a wide dais.

Another one of the funny stone tables stood before the dais. On the dais stood several tall natives in robes of importance. And seated in the center was Her Holiness. Chief priest and witch doctor. Monarch of the whole scaly world.

What can I say? To me, she looked like all the rest of the critters. Instead of the little tunic thing worn by the common folk, though, she had on a rich green robe trimmed with something that looked very much like gold embroidery. She also had gold chains around her neck and jeweled rings on her fingers. And her narrow brow was capped with a gold circlet from which dangled the two faces of Chance. One over each yellow eye. Truly a vision of power and greed.

The guard made us wait by the doorway, and went forward to present us.

"Should I kneel, or what?" I whispered to Sheila.

"Just bow deeply," she whispered back. "And stop grinning. Try to look meek."

Meek, she says.

The guard waved us forward and slithered away between the columns. So forward we went, bowing and meeking the whole way. The priesthood stared at us in stony silence. They don't blink, these people.

Sheila started off with a few nervous hisses, and Her Eminence clapped and made gagging sounds.

"That's good," Sheila said.

"What's good? She's choking to death."

"She's laughing."

"Does that mean I can grin?"

"No. Now, how do you want to be introduced?"

"Tell her I wish her the grace of the wealthy. Or whatever greeting's appropriate. Tell her I'm a respected merchant, but much awed by the variety and quality of her livelihood."

She gave me a sick look, but she started clicking away. Her Holiness bowed slightly in my direction and made a decent pass at my name. Larry Dulac is not an easy expression in a language that doesn't have an *l*, a *d*, or an *r*.

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"You are welcome, alien," she said (Sheila translating, of course). There followed a five-minute recitation of blessings and grantings of grace, with an occasional All Hail thrown in by the priesthood. Finally: "Tell me, perhaps, what you might wish to sell to us."

She licked her lips then, a little flick of the forky tongue. It was an unconscious gesture, I'm sure. Probably just thinking about the wine. But I felt a chill. I reminded myself that, among us humans, at least, that was a sure sign of greed.

"I have indeed many goods that you might find interesting, Your Reverence," I said. "However, I wish to present something of such value that you will be enriched beyond your greatest dreams."

"And what might this be?" Another lick.

"First tell me, Holiness, what is most needed? Happiness and long life? Or greater comfort here and now? Healthy and happy worshipers? Or greater gifts to the glory of God? Full coffers or clean streets?"

"Why not all of these?" she asked.

"Why not, indeed?" I replied. Then I waited.

Don't ever try to stare down someone who can't blink. It's as bad as four eyes. I bowed and looked down. Sort of meekly.

"So," she said. "We, in our Holy Wisdom, take the meager offerings afforded us by Chance to work our charitable acts among the poor, who have not the wisdom or moral strength to direct their own lives. For is it not true that To Give Is to Receive?"

You bet.

"Then I am sure I have that which you need," I said, bowing even more deeply. "In three days, Chance willing, I will return to make a presentation worthy of your notice."

"Is it something to drink, by Chance?" she asked. Lick, lick.

"I can say only that Your Worship will be most pleased at the sudden increase in good fortune."

Her Eminence stared at us a moment longer. Then she gestured, and the priesthood each pulled out a coin and flipped it. There were six of them. The count was four smiles and two frowns. They looked at her. She looked at us. And nodded.

"We will welcome your return," she said.

Then Sheila hissed a reverent farewell while we backed out of the doorway. Meekly, of course.

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We were out in the heat of the marketplace before Sheila would look at me.

"'Sudden increase of good fortune,'" she hissed. "How about food? How about medicine?"

"Look," I told her, "if the critters won't buy it, they won't buy it."

"So give it to them. And stop calling them 'critters.'" She raised her voice, and a goodly crowd stopped to watch the funny aliens yammering by the temple.

"O.K., O.K. They are not critters. Let's not get worked up." I took her arm and led her across the square. "I'm a salesman," I said, in what I hoped was a placating tone, "not a philanthropist. Besides which, better computers than mine are probably at work on the food question at this very moment. If your people are willing to develop a birth-control pill, they are certainly willing to share a few farming secrets."

"That's right, let someone else worry about it." She jerked her arm free. "Believe me, if it were legal, they'd have done it by now."

I could tell she didn't like it, but she couldn't dispute it, either. Technology comes in steps, and the law says the natives have to make the steps themselves. Anything we give them — or I sell them — has to be well within their own capabilities. Self-determination, it's called. The Technological Imperative.

"Come on," I said. "Let's finish the tour. Maybe we'll think of something."

We didn't, of course, but it made her feel better. She stopped shouting, at least.

But the afternoon was gloomier than the morning. Not only did it cloud over, but Sheila, when she spoke to me at all, pointed out all the signs of the coming catastrophe — the beggars, the sick, the starving. And the pregnant. Once I knew what a pregnant native looked like, I could see how many there were. She also made a point of dropping my expense money on every beggar in sight.

Finally, when the wind picked up and it threatened rain, we found our way back to the inn. I should say, Sheila found our way. I was plain lost in that warren.

Dinner was more of the same. But I asked about wine, and, Chance be blessed, the innkeeper had a few bottles. Well, it wasn't made from grapes, but it was drinkable. It even went with dinner.

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We were killing the bottle, when I noticed a funny clicking sound coming from another table. Two of the critters were rolling little white cubes that looked a whole lot like dice against the wall and onto the table. And money was changing hands.

"Craps," I said to Sheila, nodding toward the players.

"Watch your mouth," she said.

"No," I said, "Craps. Dice. It's an old Earth game. I bet someone sold it to them."

"Actually," she said, "that's local. It even has religious significance."

"Looks like gambling to me."

"Well, it's that too," she admitted. "But it's definitely local. Think about it. What kind of game would you invent if you worshiped Chance?"

"Craps," I agreed. "How about other games? Cards? Board games?"

"No. There's not enough chance. If you'll pardon the pun." She took another sip of her wine and leaned over the table. Her voice was a little thicker. Like she was having trouble with the tines of her tongue. "There's too much skill involved in those games, you see? I mean, you can learn to be good at them. This" — she waved her glass around at the crap shooters — "this is directly a game of chance."

"Assuming the dice aren't loaded."

"Do you want to play?"

It was tempting. I enjoy the feel of the old ivories, and I'm not adverse to risking a little small change for the big win. I watched some more coins change hands."

"Tell you what," I said. "Just ask them if we can watch."

A coin flip later, we were sitting with the natives, sharing the wine and watching them play. It was indeed craps, with a few minor variations. No elevens, for one thing, and seven didn't count after the first roll. Like craps, the first roller wanted a seven. If she didn't make it, she had to roll again to match whatever she did get. But then the two players alternated rolls, so the other could win by matching the first roll, too. And if either of them rolled a two or a twelve, she crapped out. They had special names for the two and the twelve, but "snake eyes" was not one of them.

The evening wore on, and we popped another cork. Sheila's gabble never sounded so good. Her hand felt pretty good, too, when I helped her up the stairs to our room. And when we were snuggled under the covers,

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I reached over and started rubbing her back. No conversational gambits this time. She rolled her shoulders against my hands. Mumbled something in critter talk. And fell asleep. So much for body language.

THE NEXT morning I felt like my own tongue was forked. Or at least scaly. Sheila, of course, bubbled out of bed with a loud "Good morning." I limited myself to grunts until I was sure something friendly would come out.

"I've got to hit the computer," I told her, after a skimpy breakfast. "I think I've seen enough down here."

"In one day? You've got to be kidding?" I think she was skeptical.

"I don't like to waste time on these things," I told her. I didn't tell her about my bank account. "Can you get me on a cart headed for the shuttle station?"

"Come on, you haven't seen the really poor yet. I want to show you —"

"You can show me later. And you might as well stay here and keep the room. It'll give you a chance to pick up some more idioms." It was also cheaper than the shuttle fare, but I didn't tell her that, either.

Anyway, she clammed up, gave me a tight smile, and hailed a cart. She spent a long time giving the driver directions. Then we arranged to meet at the shuttle station the next afternoon, and I was off in a cloud of mud. I waved, but she was already gabbling with some critter.

An hour later I was back at the inn. I guess directions were hard to give in their language. Sheila, of course, was out on the town, probably feeding my expense money to the beggars. So I held out my arms and roared like a shuttle, and off we went. Again. This time we made it.

The first thing I did up top was link into station comp to tap the latest data on Lucky. Expensive, but worth it in my line of work. Then I started looking for the angle. For me, that's sort of a free-association search through the data stream. I throw in a keyword or two and see what comes out. Usually that leads to other keywords. Eventually that leads to the angle. When Chance smiles on me.

A lot of stuff is illegal, of course. We're not allowed to sell concepts or seminal ideas. No printing presses. No gunpowder. No refrigerators. Wine was a stroke of genius. I checked beer, but they already had that. Too bad. Beer is more nutritious than wine. Sheila might have approved.

I crossed out poker, blackjack, and cards in general. Not enough

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chance. Same with chess, go, backgammon, mah-jongg, and all the rest. Parcheesi was mindless enough, but hardly the sort of explosion I had promised Her Holiness.

And then I had it. The Angle, with a capital A. Simple, straightforward, and even slightly religious. Sheila wasn't going to like it, which bothered me a little, but what are you going to do? Jump ships don't run on charity. I'd square it with her once I got paid. I'd buy her some native jewelry or one of those little tunics. She'd look good in one of those.

So I fed a few parameters into the computer, and in a matter of minutes, I had all the necessary diagrams and instructions (in pictograms on clay tablets, of course). In a few minutes more, I had a prototype. I celebrated with a little wine — not the local vintage, thank Chance — and got ready to shuttle down in the morning.

Sheila was late. In fact, it was nearly sundown before she arrived at the shuttle pad. And she'd gone native on me. She'd bought a tunic of her own. Which, I must admit, did indeed look great on her. But she had cut her hair short and wrapped it in a tight scarf. If I were a native, I'd have been gagging with laughter. Chalk it up to a good heart. Naive, but good.

Then I asked her why she was so late, and she said she'd had to wait till Chance favored her journey. I held my tongue and reminded myself that I liked her. But when she started flipping a coin to see if we should journey back to town, I took over. I reminded her that I was paying her salary. Not to mention room and board. She put the coin away and started clicking to the cart driver.

Needless to say, I had a very quiet evening.

The next morning we set out early for the temple. Sheila asked once about the box under my arm, but I told her I wanted to surprise her. I'd already made her take off the head scarf, because I wanted her to look as human as possible in front of the priesthood. Personally, I told her, I was afraid they'd be insulted. For some reason, that insulted her. We were not on the best of terms as the guard led us back to the sanctum sanctorum.

Her Eminence was on the dais, flanked by the Holy Six. And, if posture was anything to go by, she was very pleased to see us. Her tongue went flicking around her lips as we meeked our way forward past the funny stone table.

"You are prompt," she said, after the usual grantings of grace and such. "Our thanks. We are anxious to hear your proposal."

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"It gives me great pleasure to be able to address Your Grace today." I said, "for I have brought an item of great interest."

Sheila hissed and clicked furiously. I could only hope she was giving it the right punch.

"It is no small thing," I went on, "and greatly prized on other worlds such as yours. It is, if I may say so, truly a gift of Chance, fit for a place of honor in the Holy Rites. It will bring great wealth to the church, Your Sacritude, making possible many thousand acts of charity."

"We do not speak of food or . . . drink, I assume." Her Holiness sounded a little disappointed.

"No," I replied. "We speak of wealth."

"How interesting." Flick, flick. "And what is this marvel?"

"It's called bingo."

Sheila choked.

Well, I showed Her Holiness the prototype card and described how the game had been used by human churches since ancient times. How a small outlay in prizes would bring in a huge flow of fees for cards. How seductive it became. I didn't describe the rules, of course, or how to make the balls and basket. She had to buy that.

And of course, she did. Oh, the Holy Six flipped on it, but it was a done deal. Her Grace's eyes gleamed with avarice. After a little haggling, I had a couple of sacks of gold to exchange at the station bank for universal credits. Not the most lucrative deal I've made, but no small potatoes, either.

I told Sheila to make gracious farewells, and started backing toward the doorway. I got as far as the funny stone table with the raised sides, when Her Holiness stood up and spoke. Sheila trailed off in a drawn-out hiss.

"What's up?" I asked. I glanced nervously at the table.

"I'm not sure," Sheila said. "She's using a bunch of idioms I've never heard before."

Her Holiness stepped off the dais and walked toward us, chains jingling. She rested her hand on the rim of the table and said something else.

"She wants you to join her in some kind of ritual," Sheila said. "Something to do with the table."

"Tell her no."

"I'm not sure I can."

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"What do you mean?"

"Local law. I get the feeling this is an obligatory rite to clinch the sale."

"I don't go to this church."

"Like I said, local law."

"You don't have to smile about it." I looked over my shoulder. The door wasn't too far away. "Look," I said to Sheila, "stall her. Tell her. . . ."

Her Holiness clicked a sharp word, and half a dozen knife-wielding guardsmen appeared from behind the columns.

". . .yes," I said. "Tell her yes."

Sheila chirped away, and the guards backed off a bit. Her Holiness stepped up to the table and gestured to me. I stepped up beside her. I don't think I was shaking too much.

And then she pulled out a pair of little white cubes and dropped them on the table. I stared at them a moment. Then at Sheila.

"Dice?" I said.

"You're supposed to roll them," Sheila said.

"Like in the inn?"

"Yes. The same game."

I picked them up and tried to smile at Her Holiness.

"What are we rolling for?" I asked.

Sheila gabbled at Her Reverence, and the whole priesthood broke into gagging laughter. Sheila frowned.

"Your gold," she said.

I wiped my palms on my coveralls and decided to resume breathing. Then I had another thought.

"All of it?" I asked, sweating again.

"No," Sheila replied. "Just as much as you want."

"Well, then," I said. This was more like it.

I set a handful of coins on the table and blew on the dice. The priesthood crowded around, hissing among themselves. A functionary appeared beside Her Holiness and matched my bet. I gave the ivories a good hard roll off the back wall.

Seven. Chance be praised.

I smiled at Her Holiness and scooped her pile into mine.

"Well," I said. I handed the dice to Her Holiness.

The functionary matched the bet, and she rolled. A three. She rolled again. Five. So I took the dice and rolled. And matched her three. Her

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Holiness looked perturbed. But I scooped the coins together and handed her the dice.

She rolled double sixes. Another pot was mine.

My roll then. Another seven. The pile of coins in front of me grew beyond my wildest dreams.

And then Her Holiness rolled a seven. Suddenly my side of the table was empty. And she left the pile in front of her. I reached into my sacks and tried to match it. I felt light-headed. Like all the blood had drained to my feet. My hands worked without me, piling gold on the table till I had one single coin left.

Sheila grabbed my arm.

"Larry," she said. "I think you should stop now." All I could think of was how nice my name sounded on her forky little tongue. And how much I'd miss her when I was poor and in prison.

"Never quit when you're behind," I said. "Right, Your Grace?"

Flick, flick.

I shook the dice in my hand. The priesthood leaned closer. Sheila gripped the edge of the table. Even Her Holiness looked tense. I rolled 'em.

A five. I rolled again, sweating. An eight. I handed the dice to Her Holiness and tried to look calm.

She matched my five.

Her Holiness shoveled the mound of coins over to her side. Sheila squeezed my arm.

"Well," I said. "I guess we can go now."

But Her Holiness raised her hand and said something. Sheila grabbed me again.

"She's offering you one more roll, Larry," she said.

"What for?" I said. "This?" I held up the one remaining coin.

"All or nothing," Sheila told me.

I looked at Her Holiness, and down at the pile of coins. What the hell, I thought. I flipped my one coin.

Smiles. Time to go with Chance.

I took the dice from Her Holiness and handed them to Sheila.

"Here," I said. "Roll for me."

Sheila looked sick. And then she smiled. She took the dice and shook them like crazy, face clenched with effort. She threw them against the wall. They bounced and rolled.

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Snake eyes.

"Holy crap," she said. The priesthood gagged.

I put my hand on her shoulder.

"Don't worry about it," I said. "I had nothing to lose."

I threw the last coin onto the table and started for the door.

At which point the entire priesthood, backed by a dozen guards, surrounded me. Her Holiness said a few sharp words to Sheila.

"What now?" I said. My voice sounded strange, even to me.

Sheila clicked at Her Holiness, who clicked back. Which made Sheila click a whole lot more. Her Holiness simply nodded and walked back to the dais and sat.

"Uh, Larry?" Sheila said to me. "You know when I said, 'All or nothing' back there?"

A horrible thought occurred to me.

"Yes?" I said.

"Well, it was a special idiom. I was just kind of paraphrasing, you know?"

"Yes?" I said again. The thought became clearer.

"Well," she said, "it seems Her Holiness has won you."

Yep, that was the thought.

"You see," Sheila hurried on, "the 'all' word was a subjective reference, but, without a gender inflection to go on, I took it to mean an object. The gold. Instead, it meant you."

She smiled at me and shrugged. "Oops," she said.

What could I do? I tried to smile back.

"You mean I've got to stay here?"

She nodded.

"With her?"

She nodded again.

"Forever?"

She swallowed, and nodded again.

When I came to, I was stretched out flat on the stone table. Sheila and Her Holiness were bending over me with worried looks. At least, Sheila's was worried. Her Holiness just kept licking her lips. I kept my eyes on Sheila.

"How long?" I said.

She smiled. And for the first time, I noticed how much she looked like the face on the coin.

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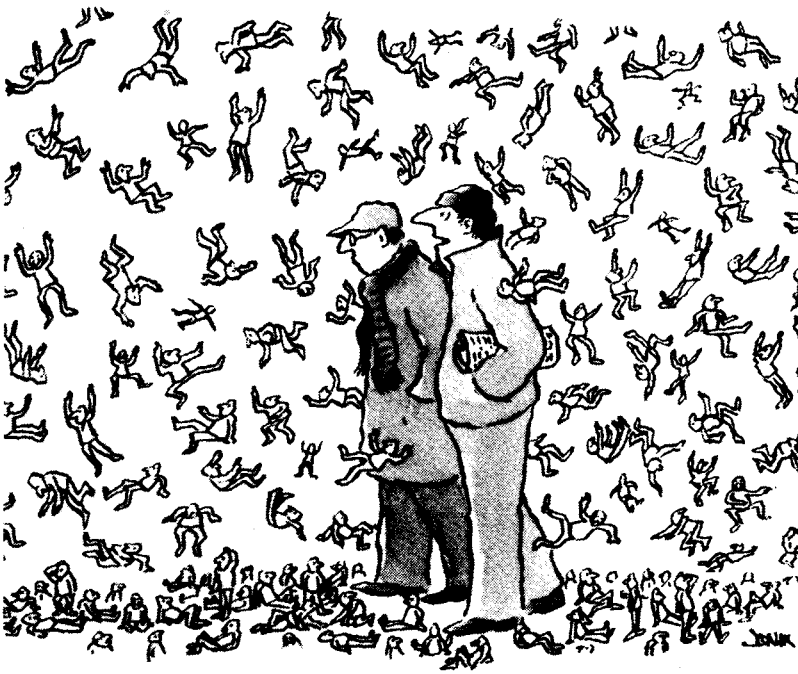
"Actually," she said, "only about a year."

Well, she was close. Every year I get to flip a coin. If Chance smiles, I'm on my way. If not. . . .

Sheila visited me a lot during the first couple of years. But then she ran off with some fast-talking sales rep from a big conglomerate. A woman. She sold them a birth-control pill shaped like one of their two-headed coins. You flip it before you take it. Sheila loved it. So did Her Holiness. I think it's a dumb idea, myself.

Still, being a vestal virgin, as it were, isn't so bad. I eat well. I get nice robes. I've even put aside a good pile of gold jewelry. Donations, you know. But they make me run the bingo parlor. Day after day. B12. G32. Click. Hiss.

Look, Chance, I know I'm not a religious man, and I don't pray much like this. But maybe next year you could give me just one little smile.



"You're right! No two are exactly alike!"

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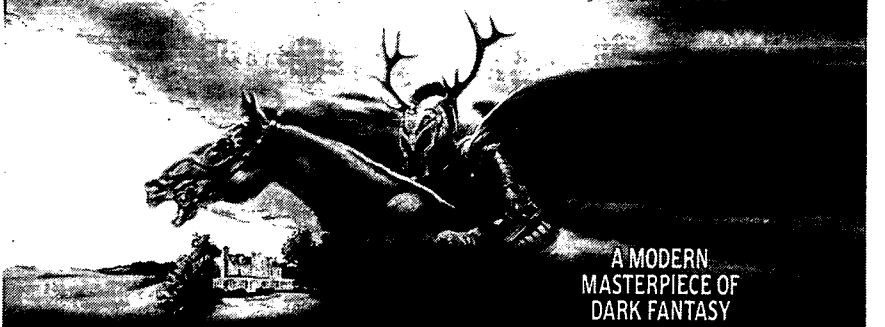

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Life for the Hastings was wonderful, full of magic... until they awakened the Magic more real than any they'd dared imagine. For with the Magic came the Bad Thing, and the Faerie, and then the Fool... and the resurrection of a primordial war with a forgotten People—a war that not only the Hastings but the whole human race could lose.

RAYMOND E. FEIST

BANTAM

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BOOKS

ALGIS BUDRYS

Shaggy B.E.M. Stories, Mike Resnick, Ed. $14.95, Nolacon II, 921 Canal St., New Orleans, LA 70112

Pulphouse Issue One, $17.95 trade, $50 signed, leatherbound, Pulphouse Publishing, Box 1227, Eugene, OR 97440

Moscon X Program Book, Jon Gustafson, Ed. $7.50 paper, $25.00 hardcover, plus $1.50 and $2.00, respectively, for postage and shipping materials. Limited Editions, Jon Gustafson, 621 East "F" St., Moscow, ID 83843

The Well-Tempered Sentence, Karen Elizabeth Gordon, Ticknor & Fields, $8.95 (1983)

The Transitive Vampire, Karen Elizabeth Gordon, Times Books, $10.95 (1984)

. . . and other fine things

* * *

THERE ARE books you are not going to find in your big chain outlets, and yet should find. Some of them are good for your soul. Others, in addition, are very apt to prove to have been fantastic investments.

Shaggy B.E.M. Stories, for example, is the first professionally edited, professionally bound, hardback collection of incunabula directed at the taxonomy of modern speculative literature. Putting it another way, it's crammed with pointed, effective, and gut-busting parodies done by acute professionals and other gifted analysts of the field.

Included here are some pieces you probably know of: George Alec Effinger's "Maureen Birnbaum, Barbarian Swordsperson" and "Maureen Birnbaum at the Earth's Core"; Isaac Asimov's "The Endochronic Properties of Resublimated Thiotimoline." Some others are legendary in certain quarters: Clive Jackson's "Swordsmen of Varnis," Randall Garrett's and Lin Carter's "Masters of the Metropolis," Cathy Ball's "Love's

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Prurient Interest."

But in addition, editor Mike Resnick has collected others that were new to these quarters: Arthur C. Clarke's "At the Mountains of Murkiness," Ralph Roberts' "The Nine Billion Puns of God," Randall Garrett's "Backstage Lensman," written with the approval of and some additional suggestions by E.E. Smith; Poul Anderson's "The Barbarian"; John Sladek's "Engineer to the Gods"; Donald A. Wollheim's "Miss McWhortle's Weird"; Marc Laidlaw's "Nutrimancer."

There are thirty selections here, in all, also including "Balloon, Oh Balloon!" by Ray Bradbudrys,* and if I ever saw a collectors' item in the making, I see it here . . . in addition to recommending it for its serious and constructive forensic value, of course.

I believe this is the first outright hardcover trade book — as distinguished from program-associated souvenir — ever published by a science fiction convention. I don't know whether copies are stocked even by the specialty SF stores, though I'm sure they can place an order for you if you'd prefer to get it that way.

And a tip of the hat to Mike Resnick for getting this idea and doing the hard work associated with editing it. Nolacon II (the 1988 world science fiction convention) has done a very nice production job, with dust jacket and all, and well worth the price at 262 pages.

*You were waiting for something like that, were you!

An amazing idea has come out of Eugene, Oregon — an SF magazine in book format. The regular copies of Issue One are trade-book priced, in a run limited to 1000, and there's a 250-copy leatherbound version at $50, with the individual pieces autographed by their authors.

Pulphouse The Hardback Magazine is edited by Kristine Kathryn Rusch and produced by Dean Wesley Smith, leading lights of the Pulphouse writing club in Eugene. It's a fully professional effort, with new — and good-to-outstanding — stories by such as Edward Bryant, Thomas F. Monteleone, J. N. Williamson, William F. Wu, Ron Goulart, Charles de Lint, Nina Kiriki Hoffman and Harlan Ellison — leavening some good-to-outstanding new stories by talented newcomers like Kij Johnson. There's also a leavening of work from people published mostly in small-press media — which, of course, is technically what *Pulphouse* also is.

It looks like a high-quality hardback, but it's put together like a professional magazine, to editorial standards that equal those of any

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other periodical in the field. The table of contents is long, as you'd expect of 267 book-sized pages, and also includes some outstanding non-fiction, including "The Gimlet Eye Returns" by art-critic and SF-art appraiser Jon Gustafson doing a takeout on horror-book cover art, a valuable article of advice to young writers by Jack Williamson, and a nifty piece by new horror star Kim Antieau, "After Great Pain," which probes excellently at why people write horror and what the potentials of horror-literature are.

As you might guess, this first issue is built around horror fiction — though, as editor Rusch's intro shows, it defines "horror" both more broadly and — I agree — more accurately than has been customary. Her position is backed up quite nicely by the contents, which range in tone from the Monteleone to the Bryant, on a scale of from the near-traditional to the new, both of them well conceived and well executed. Kij Johnson's "Ferata" falls somewhere near the middle of that scale; it may or may not be relevant that all three of these examples, and several other pieces in the book, are also Feminist in some important aspect. Ellison's "She's a Young Thing and Cannot Leave Her Mother," however, is not.

Almost all the material here is published for the first time. There are a few reprints of recent good stuff from other sources, and some of the material here will appear elsewhere in the future, sometimes under different titles. What we have here is a nexus in the literature — and a bibliophilic item that's already accreting in value. The second issue is scheduled for December, 1988, with others to follow at two-month intervals. Again, you might be able to find copies at a specialty store. But they won't be available long outside the collectors' market.

The best program book I have ever seen from any convention anywhere is the Moscon X "program book," which does indeed contain some program items and some program-book advertising, but is in fact a big anthology of new and reprint fiction, essays and art by persons who have over the years been associated with Moscon. It's available at 144 pages in 8½ X 11" paperback and in a hardbound version. The source is editor Jon Gustafson.

Moscon — held late each September in Moscow, Idaho — is the unlikely and utterly delightful creation of the fan group located in or near the town where E.E. "Doc" Smith went to college. Although it does some major-league programming, it's also the premier relaxacon of the U.S. northwest and Canadian

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west, and for years has been attracting topflight guests in SF-writing and illustrating, and science. This year's guests of honor, for instance, were Anne McCaffrey, Lela Dowling and Ken Macklin, Robert L. Forward, and Ed and Norma Beauregard as Fan Guests of Honor.

For this tenth anniversary, PESFA — the Palouse Empire Science Fiction Association — saw no reason not to publish an outstanding SF anthology and make it their program book. They have casually thought of ground-breaking ideas often in the past, beginning with the idea that you could bring top-level guests and attract fans to a small town in the Idaho panhandle, provided you did everything intelligently and made sure all were treated in a civilized manner.

As a consequence, when Gustafson began to put this book together, he was able to obtain contributions from Robert A. Heinlein, Verna Smith Trestrail, Anne McCaffrey, Ed Beauregard, Robert L. Forward, Steve Fahnestalk, Stephen L. Gillett, F.M. Busby, Frank Denton, Algis Budrys*, Suzanne Tompkins, Fritz Leiber, Julie Lutz, John Varley and P.J. Beese, Jerry Sohl, M.J. Engh, Kate Wilhelm, Bryce Walden, Jessica Amanda Salmonson, Rob Quigley, Marion Zimmer Bradley, Grover S. Krantz, Lorna Toolis, artist William R. Warren, Jr., writing an *Analog*-style story, an article by Jack Williamson, and similar prose contributions from Steve Forty, Dean Ing, Georges Giguerre, Norwescon's Richard Wright, and Jon Gustafson, plus reprints of the incredible "Ask Mr. Science" running feature from the club bulletin of the British Columbia Science Fiction Association.

The prose items are placed around art from Alex Schomburg, Tim Kirk, Frank Kelly Freas, Rick Sternbach, George Barr, Michael Goodwin, Wendy Pini, Alicia Austin, and Steve Gallacci. The four-color front cover art is by Ken Macklin; the back is by Alex Schomburg. Many of the pieces are previously unpublished anywhere.

Most of the names you didn't recognize are appended to first-rate science articles, including one on the Sasquatch, while Lorna Toolis, PhD, heads Toronto's famous Spaced-Out Library of science fiction and fantasy. For more information on many of these people, see the photo-illustrated biographical section. I have seen many an ostensibly high-quality trade anthology

And, yes, Kris Rusch and Dean Smith are good friends and former students of mine, too, and furthermore I have an essay in Pulphouse Issue Two, *and* Issue Four *will reprint my story from the Moscon X program book. Not only that, I'm proud of all this. And I damned well should be.*

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that didn't come up to this level of performance and value for money. Speaking of the latter, the books are being sold at cost to defray the printing bill. Again, move swiftly, or you will be paying considerably more in the collectors' market soon.

For years, I have railed quietly at other people's and my inability to decide whether to use "that" or "which," whether the quotation mark goes inside or outside the terminal punctuation mark, and other people's, not my, confusion on "who" and "whom," "lie" and "lay," and what a comma's for. It now turns out this was repaired some years ago by a remarkable person named Karen Elizabeth Gordon, who wrote two handy-sized books about it. For Gordon's style, see the following example from *The Well-Tempered Sentence*:

Pouring her peignoir over her bored shoulders, she harumphed, "My God, what a somnolent suite of nocturnes that was" (and what a very voluptuous drowsiness is to follow, she added to herself as she pressed his dressing gown upon him and feigned a langorous yawn.)

And this one from *The Transitive Vampire* on prepositional phrases:

The damsel with the bedroom eyes is my grandma.

It's all in there; every thorny point of grammar and punctuation that has ever baffled you — and, to my mounting rage, baffled Strunk & White in several protuberant cases — given in simple, homely examples such as those above, and illustrated with madly appropriate Medieval woodcuts or Victorian zincs. Which is not how *The University of Chicago Press Manual of Style* does it, at all, and with considerable advantageous disparity of heft.

The problem is solved. Get these little gems, and questions of exactly how to say exactly what you meant to say are solved forever. There's also a night's hilarious reading in them; you could in fact hold a pretty convivial party featuring recitations of parts taken at random, which I have done.

Now — where to get them. It's possible they can still be ordered from their publishers. Or, you can try Lou and Myrna's excellent bookstore, Amber Unicorn/Donato's Fine Books, 2202 West Charleston Boulevard #2, Las Vegas, Nevada 89102, which is how I first heard about them when Lou and Myrna came to Moscon.

And finally, we have Southern Illinois University Press, Box 3697, Carbondale, IL 62901 as a trove of titles.

SUI Press is another one of those

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out-of-the-way major resources. I don't know of any single university press that comes near to publishing as many titles of relevance to both modern and classical SF.*

Furthermore, every so often they have a clearance sale, and on request will put your name on their mailing list for its catalogue as well as their regular bulletins. Titles I picked up on the last go-'round:

Poe's Literary Battles, by Sidney P. Moss, a trade paperback originally sold for $2.85

Tough Guy Writers of the Thirties, edited by David Madden, an anthology of papers on Hemingway, Hammett, Chandler and Cain, et alia

H.G. Wells, Author in Agony, by Alfred Borrello.

The above are, mind you, books largely by academics — theses, not graven on stone.* But they make you think, they inform you on things not normally found in popular tomes on these topics, and they do, now and then, strike a certain engagingly informal tone.

And looking at the whole SIU Press list, there's plenty of fiction, including some excellent one-author SF collections, some good biography and autobiography on modern SF authors, some screenplays for famous films you may very well have an interest in, and, in short, all sorts of stuff you never thought would come out of a place called Carbondale. For that matter, you're reading this from a major resource published in an (attractively) converted farmhouse in Cornwall, Connecticut.

They are, for example, the publishers of Benchmarks: Galaxy Bookshelf by Algis Budrys, *and will be the publishers of my forthcoming collection of reviews from* F&SF, *introduction by Ed Ferman.*

**Unlike, for example,* Benchmarks.

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Books to Look For

BY ORSON SCOTT CARD

Crazy Time, Kate Wilhelm, (St. Martin's, cloth, 248 pp, $16.95)

I LOVE THE old screwball comedy films of the black-and-white era: *His Girl Friday, Bringing Up Baby, Arsenic and Old Lace.* I love the wittily satiric comedies of Hepburn and Tracy. I love the character comedy of Jack Lemmon and Walter Matthau. What I don't love is most of the pathetic attempts at comedy in science fiction and fantasy.

You see, most comedy — as opposed to satire — in our genre is written by and for eight-year-olds. Credibility of a character or a situation is blithely tossed away for the sake of a dumb joke. Authors seem to break up laughing over their own humor — they think they're a lot funnier than *I* ever think they are.

The essence of good comedy is that it is truthful, that the audience cares what happens. Sure, the characters are exaggerated, even weird — but we also like them, want them to succeed. Their weirdness is not in itself a joke, but rather the source of problems. The characters' attitude toward those problems — Donald Duck's rage, Cary Grant's pretend nonchalance, Katharine Hepburn's pluck — *that's* where the humor comes from. In other words, good comedy isn't all laughter — the audience must be emotionally involved enough to say, "Oh, no!" when something goes wrong for the character. Only when the character tries to deal with the problem does the laughter begin.

I submit that Kate Wilhelm's *Crazy Time* is the first sf screwball comedy that actually works. That Wilhelm is the first writer I've seen who can write *very* funny eccentric characters with weird dilemmas who are, nonetheless, absolutely truthful. Furthermore, its very truthfulness makes *Crazy Time* first-rate science fiction.

Sure, it all depends on a genius kid breaking into an experimental

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computer and designing a "death" ray that actually works — but that's not what the story's about. Instead, we follow the adventures of an eccentric young artist who suddenly finds himself dispersed throughout the known universe by the death ray. He only gradually learns to reassemble himself — without clothing, unfortunately — near a strikingly beautiful woman he had never actually met before.

Do they fall in love? Do they outwit the paranoid government guy who's out to destroy them? Can he convince her that he really exists and that she isn't going crazy? Comedy plots sound so dumb when you summarize them. Then again, so do most science fiction plots. Enough to say that unless your sense of humor can't deal with anything less sophisticated than *Ulysses* — or more sophisticated than the Three Stooges — you will love *Crazy Time.*

Bio of an Ogre, Piers Anthony, (Ace, cloth, 297 pp, $17.95)

Sometimes this book is Piers Anthony's memoir; sometimes it is his apologia; sometimes it is his confession. He never makes up his mind. He never has to.

If one thing comes clear in *Bio of an Ogre,* it is the fact that Piers Anthony has not lived his life to please other people. But then, people have not exactly lived their lives to please *him,* either. He has no distance from himself — he labors even harder to vindicate his own actions when he is partly in the wrong than he does when he is clearly in the right.

Yet such absolute honesty-without-perspective about who he believes that he is — that's what makes this book worth reading. This is not one of those plastic autobiographies in which famous people try to make themselves look good. Nor is this a kiss-and-tell book, in which celebs try to elevate themselves by belittling the people around them. Piers Anthony instead reveals himself to be exactly the kind of person that is at once the bane and the *raison d'etre* of science fiction: He insists on seeing the world through his own eyes, and not as someone else has told him to see it. At times this annoys other people. At times he is dead wrong. But there is no possibility of genius without peculiarity of vision.

No doubt his chapters on squabbles within our little world of sci-fi will get most of the attention. That's a shame. Because most of the book is about other things, which matter far more. I wish I could read such candid, self-revealing "bios" by a lot of other figures I admire. But few of them have the guts to do it.

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Chaos: Making a New Science, James Gleick, (Viking, cloth, 354 pp, $19.95)

Chaos isn't science fiction. Instead, it's contemporary history — how a few practicing scientists managed to lift their eyes out of the chasm of their own discipline and get a broader perspective, one that let them realize that a whole bunch of different branches of science were all facing similar questions which might actually have similar answers. The trouble was, they couldn't get anybody outside their own discipline to pay the slightest attention to them — except for a few oddballs that nobody listened to anyway.

The actual science they discovered is fascinating in its own right, but the overall message of the book transcends even the excitement of discovering regularity within chaos: This book affirms that when something is true, eventually it will become known, despite the best efforts of entrenched ignorance to slap it down. And ideas espoused only by the academically untouchable can eventually become the keys to unlock the answers to questions that the establishment was too myopic even to ask. I loved the book as science. I loved it as a story. So will you.

(I also saw in it some ray of hope that maybe such things might happen in the field of literary criticism. Maybe someday, if enough of us literary outcasts make enough noise, people will notice that the best of late-twentieth-century American literature is appearing here, in sf and fantasy, the literature of the strange.)

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Long a reader of science fiction, Judith Dubois writes that she had wondered why so many creatures from outer space land in Iowa; what would happen if they landed in — say — Africa? "Etoundi's Monkey," Judith Dubois' first sf sale is her elegant and touching answer to that question. It is set in West Africa, the author's home for seventeen years. "I graduated from Culver-Stockton College in Missouri in 1967 and joined the Peace Corps. Assigned to West Africa, I taught English, then married a wonderful man. I now live in the country in southern France."

Etoundi's Monkey

By Judith Dubois

AUNT NYAH WAS visiting Hiroko. She enjoyed looking at the Japanese girl's photo albums, intrigued by pictures of Hiroko's mother in a kimono. She shuffled through a collection of postcards representing the carved demons and heroes of a famous temple, mimicking the statues' grimaces. Hiroko laughed behind her fingers.

A Pygmy hunter sauntered up to the door and called out in a loud voice, "*Koh-koh-koh.*" That is how Pygmies knock, perhaps because their huts have no doors. It was not unusual for small men dressed in symbolic rags and a wide grin to show up at the Japanese student's cabin with monkey heads. She already had a large crate of skulls ready to be shipped to the Primate Research Institute of the University of Kyoto. She gave the hunters a few coins, and they went away chuckling at the foolish foreign woman who paid for scraps they usually threw to the dogs.

Hiroko recognized Johnny, one of her regular guides, and told him to enter. But when he held up his strange head, she started and rushed to

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grab the gory trophy. She examined it in the sunlight, then brought it into the cabin and began measuring it with jerky, feverish movements. The head was almost as big as a gorilla's, but had little else in common with the big apes. The murky yellow eyes were huge, like those of a nocturnal lemur, yet there were no visible pupils. Long gray fur of a peculiar texture grew thickly over the head and lower face except for an narrow mask of short hairs around the eyes. There was neither muzzle nor chin. It was a weird-looking creature, but what excited Hiroko most was the absence of anything resembling a mouth or nose.

She questioned the Pygmy hunter, but her excitement and limited pidgin vocabulary hampered her. She turned to Aunt Nyah.

"Please, ask Johnny what he knows about this animal, where he found it."

Puzzled, Aunt Nyah walked over to the table, but was careful not to touch the head. She stared at it, then crossed herself.

"What kind of animal is it?" asked Hiroko.

"Witchcraft. Must be. I've never seen anything like that come out of the forest."

"Please ask Johnny about it."

Aunt Nyah stiffened. "Better send him away and have nothing to do with it. It's bad luck."

"It's tremendous good luck for my thesis. Please. This is very serious."

"*Mais oui, mais oui.*" The elderly African woman shook her head. "Everything *Mademoiselle* Hiroko does is serious. *Mademoiselle* is a serious girl. Much too *sérieuse.*"

Hiroko grinned. "I have to behave myself. Naughty girls don't get study grants."

The African woman waggled her turban. "Naughty girls have fun. At your age you should be having fun, not following monkeys in the forest to collect their turds."

The Japanese girl laughed at the description of her research. "Please, ask Johnny where he found the creature. Do his people have a name for it?"

"*Na fo ou sye you don find dis beef!*"

Johnny replied in rapid pidgin, and Aunt Nyah interpreted. His band of hunters had discovered the *beef* in the forest, a long trot from the village. It was a large *beef* and had made a delicious stew. Pidgin, like the other local languages, made no distinction between "meat" and "animal," using

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the word *beef* to indicate anything that might go into the soup pot. Johnny promised to show Hiroko where they had found the creature. He shrugged at her next question. He didn't know whether or not they could find others. Perhaps. He grinned. But it would be difficult work. Much more difficult than tracking the mandrills Hiroko occasionally hired him to find. She would have to pay more. The *beef* was fierce when attacked. It had fought viciously. Even the little one. . . .

Hiroko interrupted with a startled question.

Yes, the creature was carrying its young when they found it.

Shaking her head sadly, the student turned to her interpreter. "Please. You must make him understand. His family has made stew out of two priceless specimens. This animal has never been observed or reported before. I don't even know what family it belongs to. He must not let his hunters harm any others they come across. The government will want to protect the species."

"If you think Johnny and his hunters care about government regulations. . . ."

"They'll be paid for their forbearance. Such an animal is more valuable than a dozen chimpanzees."

Seeing how urgent Hiroko was, Aunt Nyah convinced Johnny that if he caught any more of the strange beasts, they would be worth more to him alive than in the stewpot. The little hunter gave her a worried frown.

"Fo one small beef like so, how much she fit give me? She fit give me twenty thousand?"

Hiroko's Oriental eyes widened. She understood pidgin better than she spoke it. "Does he still have the infant, Aunt Nyah? Is that what he is saying? Of course I'll give him twenty thousand francs. My university will be willing to pay much more than that."

When the old woman relayed this information to Johnny, he woefully shook his head. *"I don be one foolish man. I don sell dis thing fo Massa Etoundi. Massa Etoundi, he don thief me plenty. He never pay me so good price."*

"*Monsieur* Etoundi?" asked Hiroko. "*Monsieur* Etoundi bought it? I'll go see him right away. I'll explain to him how important. . . ."

"That wouldn't be a wise thing to do," interrupted Aunt Nyah. She held the girl by the shoulders to keep her in her chair. "If you want that animal, that's not the way to go about it. As soon as my brother-in-law sees how

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eager you are, he'll start raising his price; and the more you offer him, the more he'll ask; and when you agree to his highest price, he'll grow suspicious and decide he's not asking enough, that he can get more from someone else. Etoundi is so clever he outsmarts himself. Let me handle this. I'll find out how much he wants, and let him think a Hausa trader has asked me to buy for him."

Hiroko hesitated, then agreed. "While you bargain with *Monsieur* Etoundi, I shall go into the forest with Johnny. Perhaps he can find other creatures like this one."

"*Très bien*," replied Aunt Nyah. "While you're in the Pygmy camp, try to buy me a small piece of smoked meat. But don't let them rob you."

THE OLD woman went to the hut in which she lived alone to prepare for a formal visit to her sisters-in-law. In one corner of the room, a cast-iron kettle simmered over a small fire amidst three stones. Nyah squatted beside it, took off the lid, and sniffed. Whisky, the old bitch she kept for company, approached and wagged an interested tail. Thick red palm oil floated on the surface of a rich stew made with gumbo, tender white mushrooms, a small piece of zebu tail, and plenty of hot pepper. "It's not for you, Whisky, and not for me, either." Nyah sighed and spooned the stew into a gaudily painted tin dish. The small, short-haired dog returned to its corner with a disappointed slouch.

Nyah washed in a basin and opened the battered metal chest that contained her wardrobe. Most of her dresses dated from her brief marriage to Etoundi's brother. She saved her bride's finery for special occasions and wore hand-me-downs given her by Etoundi's wives for everyday wear.

She chose a black lace gown, to remind her hosts that she was a widow and not a cast-off wife. After his brother's death, Etoundi had inherited Nyah as a second wife. It was an old custom meant to provide for women who had neither husbands nor grown sons. But the young widow had bitterly resented his claims. Her hostility soon discouraged him; his accusations that she was barren, insolent, and bad-tempered frightened other suitors. When a new kitchen was built, Nyah carried her cot into the old hut, gathered palm branches to rethatch the roof, and repaired the crumbling walls with a fresh coat of adobe. She cleared her own garden and lived on what she was able to earn selling vegetables and fried pastries in the market. Etoundi took other, younger, wives and forgot his prerogatives

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over his brother's widow. The village children, constantly in and out of the little shack, called her Aunt Nyah.

She finished knotting a scarf over her gray braids and picked up the dish of stew. As she crossed the yard, she admired the blossomlike bracts of a flaming red bougainvillea that arched over the roof of her brother-in-law's house. Etoundi was sitting alone on his veranda, listening to a soccer game on the radio. The healer wore sandals and a large pagne knotted under his bulging paunch. It left bare his womanish breasts and their sparse growth of hair. His plump, cheerful face was belied by the shrewd eyes behind gold-rimmed spectacles. On market days, dressed in a Tergal suit, he looked more like a prosperous merchant or a retired bureaucrat than a witch doctor. But the fawning court of young apprentices that followed him about showed more respect than an ordinary mortal could command.

Nyah walked by him without stopping. *"I hangwe, mbolopehe."*

Etoundi nodded and returned her greeting with a mumbled, *"Sitah, mbolo."* His attention was riveted to the game going on inside his oversized transistor. The radio announcer began to scream incoherently as Nyah rounded the corner of the house.

She found the healer's present three wives in the kitchen hut. Over the years, some had come and some had gone. Madjoli, Etoundi's first wife, was a heavy, middle-aged woman in a faded pagne tied over her breasts. The hair on one side of her head stood out in spikes while a younger co-wife worked on the other side, twisting small tufts into intricate braids that lay flat against her skull. A girl still in her teens sat on a leather cushion and nursed a chubby baby. Madjoli had once hated the pretty Nyah as a rival. Now, accustomed to co-wives who shared the work and honored her as head wife, she greeted Nyah kindly and had her sit on the bench at her side. She was pleased by the gift of stew. It was not difficult to get her to talk about her husband's recent purchase from the Pygmies.

"This is even more important than I thought, Aunt Nyah." Hiroko was trembling with emotion, making tight knots of her fingers in an effort to stay calm. "Johnny showed me where they captured the creature, and not far away, we discovered a burned-out crater. There seems to be something metal at the bottom of it, but it's so melted I could tell little about it." She paused and gulped air before going on. "It is possible that the creature

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Johnny and his hunters killed was an extraterrestrial, that it came from outer space, another world."

The African woman nodded wisely. The radio said men had gone to the moon and returned, and people from the city said this was true. It was no more difficult to believe that strange creatures from other worlds could visit the earth.

"We must convince Etoundi to turn the infant over to the authorities. As quickly as possible. I am going to send a telegram to my director in the capital city. He will. . . ."

Aunt Nyah held up a hand to stop the girl. She was sorry to disappoint her. Hiroko was still young enough to care deeply about many things. "Etoundi will never give it up. He believes it is a powerful fetish, that it will make him a great healer, a very rich healer. He will not let the postmaster send your telegram. If you bring in the authorities, he will only hide the creature and show them a chimpanzee in a cage until they go away. This is his village. He will do as he pleases."

"He can ask his price. . . ."

"Such a fetish has no price. It is useless to worry yourself about it. The creature will not live long enough to make such a fuss over it." She shrugged at Hiroko's look of dismay. "Madjoli says it refuses to eat and is very weak. Etoundi does not care if it dies. He will dry the meat and skin, grind up the bones, and sell it to his customers, sliver by sliver, pinch by pinch."

Hiroko grabbed Aunt Nyah's knee. "Please. You are my only true friend in the village. I can count on no one else. Please arrange to let me see the animal. If I can show the authorities a photograph, they will act, perhaps in time to save its life. Our best scientists should be studying it, trying to help it survive."

Nyah looked down at the hand on her knee. The Japanese girl had tiny hands, like a child's. She seemed too young to have come so far from her parents and family. Nyah would never have let a daughter of hers go away to live among strangers. Most of the village viewed the foreign student with suspicion, but Aunt Nyah had been a helpful ally from the beginning. The old woman patted Hiroko's little fingers. "I shall take you to see it. But we must. . . ." She hunched her shoulders and mimicked a sneak. ". . . go in the night like thieves. No one must see us."

Hiroko nodded soberly. "If it were not so important to the entire world

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to learn what the animal is and save it if it can be saved, I would not ask this of you."

The African woman smiled, suddenly unveiling the handsome young bride that had been brought to the village many years ago. "If I did not detest Etoundi so thoroughly, perhaps I would not do it."

That night the village emptied to attend a wake four kilometers away. The deceased was a man of importance, a former postmaster in town, who had been buried a week earlier. Now the family was holding a wake to keep his ghost from returning to haunt them. Etoundi's village set out in high spirits. A proper wake included plenty to eat and drink, music, dancing, and storytelling until dawn.

Aunt Nyah left with a group of younger cousins. She was gay and talkative for the first two kilometers so that they would remember her walking to the wake with them. Afterward she fell silent and let them outpace her. Once they were out of sight, she left the road and followed a network of footpaths through the cacao plantations and gardens back to the village.

As soon as she reached Hiroko's cabin, the Japanese girl wanted to go to Etoundi's house. The older woman refused. "We must wait. The second wife, Mouadakoukou, did not go to the wake. They say she is ill. We must be certain she is asleep before we attempt to enter the house."

Hiroko showed her the drawings she had been making of the head. To preserve it, she had put it in a large jar filled with alcohol. Aunt Nyah preferred looking at the photo albums. It was past midnight when she heard an owl hoot nearby, and glanced up with a worried frown. She shuddered.

"That's an evil bird. It sings when it smells death."

Hiroko smiled. "I think it smells only a fat rat."

Displeased, Aunt Nyah shrugged. "Well, let us be going. If she's an honest wife, Mouadakoukou is asleep by now. Bring a flashlight." She blew out the kerosene lamp, and they left the little hut to enter a world painted with a palette of muted grays. The full moon illuminated the village; its magical light banished the timid night shadows to their holes under the eaves and within corners and crooked angles. Pale gray fringes of silk waved in the banana groves; the village roofs gleamed silver; the barren yards were smooth courts of slate and iron. The two women circled the

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houses on a narrow, moonlit path that meandered through sprawling gardens to approach Etoundi's house from the rear.

The back door was unlatched. Aunt Nyah gave a small tisk of disapproval and led the way into the house. Moonlight coming through the open door dimly illuminated a long hall that ran the full length of the building. Nyah counted the doors until she reached the storeroom. Etoundi often bought baby monkeys and chimpanzees from the Pygmies to resell to Europeans in town. He kept his sad little prisoners in the storeroom next to his bedroom.

Of course the door was locked. She pointed to Madjoli's room across the hall. The first wife kept the storeroom keys.

Nyah and the Japanese girl entered the room and shut the door. Wooden shutters kept the moonlight out and the room dark. Nyah turned on the flashlight. Its beam slid over the bed shrouded in mosquito netting, metal chests stacked one on top of the other, and a small table with a kerosene lamp next to the bed. Madjoli was a well-organized person who rarely changed her habits. Most of the village knew where she kept her keys. A blue vase stood flowerless on the little table. Nyah turned it upside down, and a bundle of keys fell out.

The two women furtively crossed the hall. For long, exasperating minutes they tried the keys on the lock one after another without any success, until at last they heard a tumbler click. They entered the storeroom and quickly closed the door behind them.

The creature was lying at the bottom of a wooden crate. Its huge eyes reflected the flashlight beam. As they approached, they were almost overpowered by its stench. Its fur was matted and damp with liquid, greenish fecal matter that also covered the cage floor. It was aware of them and made one brief, feeble effort to stir, then lapsed into apathy.

"*Eeyah*," said Aunt Nyah, moved by pity.

"It must be properly cared for," whispered Hiroko. "We cannot just let it die."

Nyah shrugged. The creature belonged to Etoundi, and he did not really care whether it lived or died.

"We could take it," said Hiroko. "I could take it to my director in the city. He would see that it received treatment. It would still be Etoundi's property, of course, but it might live, with the proper care."

Nyah was shocked by the intensity in the girl's voice. She turned the

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flashlight on Hiroko's smooth, round face, but it told her very little. She shrugged doubtfully. Getting in to take pictures of the creature was one thing, but she could not let the foreign student steal it. "Take your pictures," she whispered. "I can hear voices coming along the road."

Hiroko hesitated. "Surely. . . ."

"Hush!" Aunt Nyah turned off the flashlight.

There was loud laughter outside the window. Then a door in the house slammed open, and someone ran past the storeroom. They heard a man shout in surprise, then a loud commotion. The high, frightened voice of a woman was crying, "Thief! Thief!" An angry voice they recognized as Etoundi's drowned out the woman's until she began screaming.

"What is happening?" asked Hiroko.

Aunt Nyah chuckled. "Etoundi returned, and Mouadakoukou must have had a lover in her room. Etoundi saw him run out of the house. Mouadakoukou is trying to convince him that it was a thief he saw. He's beating her. If she sticks to her story, Etoundi will at least pretend to believe her, to save face."

The Japanese girl winced at a particularly loud scream.

"He's enjoying himself," muttered Nyah. "That is why I moved out of his house."

After a while the blows stopped, and the woman's screams faded to muffled sobs. Etoundi was making an angry, indignant speech. Doors began to open and slam closed in the hallway. Nyah pulled Hiroko to the back of the storeroom and made her crouch beside her.

"He's searching the house," she explained. "To see if the thief took anything. I forgot the key on the outside."

"He's going to find us."

"Perhaps not. In the dark he may take us for a couple of sacks of cacao."

The door to Madjoli's room across the way slammed open, then slammed shut again.

The storeroom door opened. Etoundi's short, stocky figure stood in the doorway holding a kerosene lamp. The two women cringed in the dark shadows and stopped breathing.

They waited. The healer held up his lamp and entered the storeroom. He was not looking at the women and did not seem to suspect their presence. His gaze was on the strange creature in the cage. But as he raised his lamp higher, its yellow glow struck the bright print of Aunt Nyah's dress.

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"I had to see the animal you bought from the Pygmies. It may come from another world."

Etoundi started, then gave a surprised grunt.

Nyah stood and stepped forward, hoping she could mask the Japanese girl crouching behind her. But Hiroko did not have the sense to go on hiding. She stood up and came to stand beside the African woman. Etoundi stared at them.

"We did not come to steal," said Hiroko. "I had to see the animal you bought from the Pygmies. I believe it may be a sentient, sapient being. It may come from another world. It appears to be unrelated to any life-form known on earth. It needs care. It is very valuable, perhaps priceless. You must let experts care for it, try to keep it alive. You will be paid. . . ."

"Shut up!" Etoundi cried. His growing fury had gotten the better of his amazement and whatever awe he might have had for the foreign scholar. "I know how the government pays. With promises. The fetish is mine! I bought it. Get out of my house!" He grabbed Hiroko's arm and yanked her across the storeroom and out the door. Seeing the camera she held, he tore it out of her grasp and smashed it on the floor. Then he stomped on it. When nothing was left but debris, he looked up at the Japanese girl. His eyes were cold and hostile, his voice lethal.

"If I find you in my house again, I will report you to the authorities. I'll tell them . . . enough to have you expelled within twenty-four hours!"

Hiroko tried to protest, but Etoundi pushed her brutally down the hall. Over his shoulder she saw Aunt Nyah signaling her to go quietly. She let herself be shoved out of the healer's house.

Etoundi returned to attack the woman he had once claimed as a wife. "You brought her here. Insolent whore. You opened the storeroom for her, showed her my fetish! How could you dare? Who was the man that was with you?"

Nyah said nothing, sensing that his anger, originally provoked by Mouadakoukou, had carried him too far, that he was beyond listening, beyond reason. He approached. His eyes were bloodshot. His breath and body stank of alcohol, as if the evening's many drinks had soured and turned to a poisonous liquor that seeped from his pores. She could not keep the repulsion, the hatred, she felt for him out of her eyes.

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He slapped her. She staggered but continued to glare at him. Then Etoundi hit her with his fist and struck her again as she fell. Using both fists, he buffeted her from side to side like a limp sandbag.

For fear Hiroko would hear, return, and be punished in the same manner, Nyah held back her cries. Quickly, she realized that her silence was depriving Etoundi of a pleasure he had counted on; he wanted to hear her scream. She bit her lips tightly. It was not courage that kept her mute but spite.

Village children are not trained to stoicism; it is not expected of adults. When in pain, they cry, scream, and howl without shame. Nyah's silence under his blows infuriated Etoundi. He hit her harder, letting the hatred and anger her pride inspired take over, yielding to a mindless, sensual pleasure in giving pain. he continued beating the old woman until someone grabbed him and pushed him away from his victim.

Madjoli, his first wife, was holding his arms and screaming at him.

"Fool! You've killed her!"

He stared at Nyah's inert body sprawled indecently among the canned goods and tins of kerosene. For an instant, panic gripped him. He had not meant to kill her, only to punish her for betraying him to the foreign woman. If she had cried out, if she had wept and pleaded, he would have stopped.

"Hush!" said Madjoli suddenly. She turned a flashlight on Nyah's body. The bloodied lips quivered with a faint moan.

The man turned away, more relieved than he wished to show. "Get her out of here. I don't want to ever see her again. She must leave the village. When my brother died, I did my duty by her and took her into my home. When she refused to respect me as her husband and bear my children, I tolerated her insolence for my brother's sake. But tonight she came into my house as a thief, to steal the fetish. The foreign woman must have bribed her. She does not deserve my trust. She must leave the village."

"She had no other family," objected Madjoli.

"Let her go where she will!" shouted Etoundi. "Let her go to the city. If she's too old to play the whore, let her beg in the streets. I promise you, woman, that if I see her around here again, she won't survive the next beating I give her. She's a demon, Satan's wife, not mine. She tried to use the evil eye on me, but my magic was too strong for her." He left the storeroom, still shouting. Soon Madjoli could hear him out in the yard, relating to his

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apprentices and the rest of the village Nyah's shocking betrayal. She could not see him, but she could imagine the expressive, dramatic gestures he was using. Etoundi was a good orator. Passion made his voice loud and convincing. The village would believe him and accept Nyah's exile.

Madjoli knelt and put her arm under Nyah's head. She slipped the other arm under Nyah's knees and managed to stand, the tall, slim body she had once envied cradled against her large breasts like an ungainly child. She had to carry the unconscious woman back to her hut alone. No one else dared touch the bearer of the evil eye.

Aunt Nyah heard Whisky whining, and struggled to sit up. Her body ached with a sullen, throbbing pain, an alien thing that burrowed deep within her and would not be dislodged. She undid her corsage and saw bruises on her arms and breasts, dark splotches on the light mahogany of her skin. She tasted blood. Her lips were cut and swollen. Two teeth wobbled. Her left eye would not open. She gingerly touched the sore and puffy skin around it and moaned.

Whisky laid her head on her mistress's knees. Aunt Nyah bent over the bitch and embraced her with sore, aching arms. She began to weep, keening shrilly her grief and misery. Salty tears stung the cut and torn flesh of her lips. The dog whined again and tried to comfort her with wet licks.

"Nyah."

Madjoli stood in the doorway with unhappy eyes. "*Eeeyah*. Why do you anger him so? Why do you seek out sorrows?" She came in, carrying a basket that she set on the floor beside Nyah's low bamboo cot. It contained cotton and a disinfectant, ointment and bandages. Gently, she forced Nyah to lay down again, and began cleaning the cuts left by Etoundi's rings. "If you have the evil eye, you use it against none but yourself."

"Who says I have the evil eye?" Aunt Nyah's swollen lips blurred her words.

"Etoundi. He says you must leave the village. If he sees you again, he will beat you again. He claims you tried to use the evil eye on him. People believe him. No one will buy your pastries or plaintain in the market."

"*Eeeyah!*" Aunt Nyah wailed, heedless of who might hear her now.

"Patience, patience," murmured Madjoli. Her words were Africa's eternal reply to sorrow. They did not advise to be patient and hope for better,

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but rather to be patient and accept fate. Etoundi's wife began to rub ointment into the inky bruises. "*Eeeeyah*, Nyah. How I hated you when first you came to the village. So lovely and proud, you walked like a princess. My husband wanted you; if you had wished, he would have repudiated me, sent me back to my father, and kept you as his only wife."

"Until he took another."

Madjoli shrugged. "Perhaps. Men are like that."

The woman lying on the cot grunted.

"You could have been happy with him. He would have given you children. If you had a son to care for you now. . . ."

"*Eeeyah*." Nyah gripped her friend's hand tightly. "Say no more. You are touching a deep, old wound. Etoundi's blows did not hurt as much."

Madjoli sighed and continued the massage. After a short silence she asked, "When will you leave?"

"Tomorrow. I'll take the Mammy wagon that goes to the city."

"Have you any money?"

"Just enough for a ticket."

"I have brought you some." She frowned at Nyah's surprised protest. "It is not mine. Mouadakoukou sends it to you. She . . . she is grateful that you did not tell Etoundi that the man who ran out of the house was not with you."

Nyah sat up and stared at the heavy, worn woman. "Why? Why do you tell me this? If your husband's wife is misbehaving, why do you not tell him?"

"Did you see the man who ran away?"

"No."

Madjoli shook her head. "It was my young brother, Bikanda. He is wild and foolish. Mouadakoukou is unhappy since her husband has a new favorite. I was the one that told Etoundi that she was too sick to go to the wake last night. They would have met whatever I did; I hoped to make it discreet."

Nyah touched Madjoli's hand. Etoundi's first wife had borne him eight children. She remembered the stout, cheerful girl suffering through her pregnancies, grieving over the three babies she had lost, working hard in her fields to feed her children, being forced to accept the pretty young co-wives that Etoundi installed under her roof. Nyah had envied her the children and grandchildren that would comfort her old age, but knew they

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had been paid for with tribulations she had not shared. She hesitated, then said, "I would ask one thing of you. I am ashamed. You have done much for me, and I would ask more."

"Ask what you will. I cannot refuse you. Etoundi truly believes that the man he saw was helping you. For my brother's sake, I can refuse you nothing."

"I have no right to ask. You may say no, and I will still kiss you good-bye and bless you for your kindness. But I would punish Etoundi for the beating he gave me. I did not go into his house to steal; I only wanted to show the fetish to the foreign woman."

Madjoli waited. When Nyah failed to continue, she said, "Yes?"

"Bring me the fetish." Nyah's words were abrupt and brutal.

Madjoli frowned. "You are asking me to steal from my husband."

Nyah did not protest. She looked aside. "Yes, I am."

The heavy woman stood and walked to the door. "What would you do with it?"

"I will sell it to the foreign woman. She said it is worth much money. I will give the money to your son, Ntonga. Perhaps he will let me live with him. Students are always in need of money."

Madjoli turned to gaze at the little fire in the corner of the hut. "Etoundi promised to send Ntonga money from the coffee harvest, but used it all to pay the dowry he owed for Nyake. I will bring you the fetish. But I do not believe you will get much money for it."

"Why?"

"It is dying. It cannot eat. It has no mouth to eat with."

A FLAME FLICKERED over the smoldering stub of a branch amidst three stones, dimly lighting the small hut. Aunt Nyah sat on her cot and looked around her. The shelves were bare, the many hooks set in the beams empty. She had lived there for over thirty years, and it had taken only a couple of hours to pack all her belongings. The tin chest sat by the door. She held a small bundle knotted in a piece of pagne on her lap. She waited.

The night that crouched beyond her open door was quiet. Nyah stared at the dying fire. No one from the village had come to say good-bye. At dusk, everyone had gone to bed early, locking their doors and closing their shutters. Fear of the evil eye had made them forget the years of friendship

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and the many sweet pastries she had shared with their children. She remembered the greedy little faces crowded around the pot of red palm oil bubbling on her fire while she ladled off the golden globs of fried dough as they rose to the surface. She had been Aunt Nyah then. Now she was a barren old woman alone, a stranger to be shunned.

"*Koh-koh-koh.*"

Madjoli stood in the doorway and waited for Nyah's nod before she entered. The heavy woman crossed to the fire, squatted, and unwrapped the bundle she carried. Nyah came to her side, and the two women stared at Etoundi's strange fetish.

Its damp, matted fur stank with an acrid, nauseating odor. Its large eyes were veiled with a thin gray membrane. The ribs of the creature's emaciated chest stood out in ridges under the soiled fur, ridges that ran the wrong way. It had four limbs, hollow, boneless tubes of muscle like an elephant's trunk, and no tail. Madjoli poked at her offering in disgust. It stirred weakly and at once subsided.

"It's dying," said Nyah.

Etoundi's first wife nodded. "It's starving to death. It has no mouth. How could we feed it?"

"I'll have to clean it. They won't let me on the Mammy wagon with something that smells so badly."

Madjoli stood. "I must go back now." She hesitated. "Etoundi sent some of his apprentices to the foreign woman's cabin. They smashed things, frightened her. They took the head she bought from the Pygmies. She has gone to the mission."

"They did not hurt her."

"No. Etoundi only wanted to scare her and get the head she had."

Nyah embranced her friend. "Madjoli, you have been kind to me. Will you care for Whisky? She's a good watchdog, and she doesn't eat much."

Madjoli nodded. Suddenly tears stood in her eyes. She hugged Nyah tightly. "*Walka fine, sitah.*"

"*Walka fine, sitah,* my sister. May God be kind to you." Nyah watched her friend leave the hut and disappear in the darkness.

The creature at her feet mewed. She stooped over it, dismayed at its feebleness. Then she remembered discarding a small brush used to wash clothes. She found it, built up her fire, and moved the cot closer to its light. She took off the good dress she had put on for traveling and hung

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it on a hook. She spread a rag over her bare knees and took the dying infant onto her lap.

At first she was fearful of touching it, still half believing it a creature of witchcraft, sent by an enemy to bring about her doom. But it was so feeble and miserable that pity vanquished her hesitation. It lay against her skin, trembling like a frightened kitten. Its bones were as light as a bird's. She wished it could live, but she did not know how to feed something that had no mouth.

She brushed it thoroughly, methodically, starting at the head and working her way down. The creature did not struggle or resist her. For a reason she could not have explained, she felt that it took some comfort in her handling. Its fur became soft and silky when clean. She was so absorbed in her work that only when she had finished did she notice the end of one of its tubular arms fastened to her waist. Gently, she pried it loose, breaking the suction. The gray membranes over the strange, pupilless eyes flickered, then the creature wrapped its limbs around itself in a ball and lay still.

"It feels better now that it's clean," she thought. She examined the spot on her waist. The firelight revealed no mark, but the skin was tender and a bit sore. She shrugged. Etoundi had given her more painful bruises.

She did not want to be noticed carrying the creature or even a suspicious bundle. She decided to conceal it under the loose folds of her Mother Hubbard dress. Using an old pagne, she tied the sleeping creature to her waist just below her breasts. Then she put on the dress. Its five yards of material hung in full gathers from her shoulders. The bulge on her stomach was not noticeable. She felt and shared the faint rhythm of the creature's breathing.

Long before dawn, Aunt Nyah stood by the edge of the road waiting for the Mammy wagon. An owl hooted, and she shivered, wondering whose death the bird of evil omen was prophesying, her own or that of the small beast cradled under her breasts.

The wind freshened and began to blow harder. She could hear rain falling on the forest across the valley, a dull roar like the marching of an army approaching in the night. She clutched her shawl tighter against the chill wind.

Suddenly distant headlights appeared, drilling a round well of light through the night under the giant trees. A roar, a sputtering explosion, and

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a creaking rumble were followed by the screech of gears shifting. The Mammy wagon, a battered old bus, lumbered to a stop beside her. It was a lugubrious, top-heavy silhouette in the dark. An agile motorboy hopped out the back door and scrambled up to the roof. The driver picked up Aunt Nyah's tin chest and passed it to the motorboy. He found a place for it among the suitcases, clusters of bananas, demijohns of palm wine, baskets of chickens, and a pair of bleating goats. After the ritual protestations over the price, Aunt Nyah paid the driver and climbed into his bus. In the back a fat Bamileke merchant grudgingly squeezed against his neighbor, a Hausa trader, to free a small space for her on the narrow metal bench they occupied. The driver started his motor; the bus roared and lurched forward. She looked out the window, but the village was already hidden behind the forest and the night. She clasped the little beast she carried, and imagined that it stirred and snuggled closer to her.

The rain caught up with them, enclosing the crowded bus with heavy curtains of water. Nyah stared past the dozing passengers around her into the dark forest. The headlights, their beams compressed and stifled by the rain, barely lit the dirt road. The bus bumped and rolled through a faint tunnel of light while the night's dark gullet pursued it.

She hunched her shoulders and settled back on her spine, trying to find a comfortable position on the narrow ledge of a seat she had been allowed. They would reach the mission shortly after dawn. Her thoughts whirled in her head like leaves caught in a wind dervish. The cuts and bruises Etoundi had given her ached. She could see his face, contorted with hate and rage. Then she saw herself in the city, a skinny old woman dressed in rags stiff with dirt, begging from foreigners.

The strange little creature cradled against her stomach stirred and kissed her with warm lips. Grateful for its affection, Nyah cuddled it closer before she wondered how something that had no mouth could kiss. The soft lips touched her again and clung gently to her. She remembered how one of the peculiar hollow limbs had held to her while she cleaned the creature. And felt another mouth grip her flesh. She laughed. They had been looking for a mouth in the usual place, and had refused to see that the strange animal had four very obvious mouths. Its touch was not disagreeable. The lips were soft, warm, and gentle. She sat quietly and waited. After a while the beast released its hold.

Unexplainable despair gripped Nyah. "It is too weak to feed," she

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thought. "Or I'm not giving it the nourishment it needs." Suddenly the tears she had not shed on leaving the village stung her eyes. She was a useless old woman, good for nothing, loved by no one, incapable of even keeping alive this fragile being that trusted her.

One of its arms brushed against her in a light caress and gripped her skin. Its hold seemed stronger than before. Now she could feel it sucking, pulling its nourishment through her skin. Another took hold, and another. With one hand she cautiously felt its body through the folds of her dress. All four of its limbs were fastened to her. She tugged on one gently without breaking its hold.

Contentment settled over the old woman. She had never had a child to feed at her breast and had often been intrigued by an absent look on the faces of friends nursing their babies. They seemed to withdraw into a private world of peace. Now she was entering that world, tasting the bliss of being needed.

"My *mouna*, my little one," she murmured. After a while the furry infant stopped sucking and slept. Later it awoke and began to feed again. Nyah felt it recovering, gaining strength; life was returning with the nourishment she was giving. A smile of pride lit her battered face. As the lopsided bus dodged potholes and stumbled along the forest track, she willingly shared her strength with the orphaned stranger.

The Mammy wagon reached the top of a high hill, and Nyah saw the first faint light of dawn. Then the road dipped into the forest again, and the world of night briefly returned. The morning mists were rising when they reached the mission, a group of red-brick buildings set among lawns and flowers. Smoke spiraled from a cluster of native huts behind the mission where women were starting their cooking fires.

The Dutch priest was having breakfast and grumbling at his cook, a sly-looking Ngoumba who grumbled back at him. Nyah asked for *Mademoiselle* Hiroko, saying she had brought something for her. The cook led her down a long veranda and knocked on a door.

The Japanese girl opened the door and cried out at the sight of Aunt Nyah. She bowed first, then remembered to shake hands, staring in dismay at the African woman's face. "What have they done to you? You must see a doctor. Forgive me for getting you involved in this. I did not know. . . ."

"Hush, child. I got myself involved in this. If I had let you go to Etoundi at once as you wished, he would have thrown you out, but I wouldn't have

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earned myself a beating. He enjoyed it so much I wonder why he waited so long. Don't worry. By next week I'll be almost pretty again." She sat down on the narrow bed. "Close the door."

Hiroko obeyed. "Would you care for some tea?"

Nyah remembered the bitter green tea that Hiroko drank without sugar. "No. I would rather have coffee. And some whiskey."

Hiroko looked surprised, but she nodded and smiled. "I'll ask the priest for some. Please wait here."

As soon as she left, Aunt Nyah lifted her dress to look at the tiny beast she carried. It seemed to be sleeping peacefully. Its fur gleamed like soft gray silk. She touched it gently, and the large yellow eyes opened to hold her gaze. They no longer beamed an aura of misery and suffering. She heard a step in the hall outside and quickly lowered her dress.

Hiroko entered carrying a loaf of bread, a small jar of instant coffee, and a bottle of Johnnie Walker. While she heated water and laid out dishes for breakfast, Nyah remained silent. She was grateful for the Japanese girl's innate courtesy that permitted her to withdraw into her own thoughts and lay her plans for the future with as much privacy as if she had occupied a separate room.

The African woman drank a cup of hot coffee, ate some bread, and then poured herself a glass of brown and gold liquor. She smiled at Hiroko, poured part of the whiskey out on the floor, and laughed. "It's for the old spirits." She swallowed what was left in the glass. It burned, but the taste it left in her mouth was good. She savored it. Then began to speak somewhat formally. "*Mademoiselle* Hiroko, if I had been able to bring you Etoundi's monkey, what would you have done with it?"

"I would have taken it to my director in the city. He would have notified other scientists. We would have studied it, tried to learn everything possible about it, about where it came from, about what it is."

Aunt Nyah nodded. "Do you think they would have put it in a cage?"

Hiroko looked perplexed. "Perhaps. Probably. To make sure it wasn't stolen or didn't run away. It would have been a comfortable cage, nothing like the crate Etoundi has it in."

The old woman nodded again. "What are you going to do now?"

The Japanese girl grimaced. "Set up a new study site near here. I can't stay in the village if Etoundi doesn't want me there. You know they threat-

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ened me, took the head I had. I have nothing to show my director but some drawings and a wild tale."

Aunt Nyah gave the girl a sly, teasing smile. "I've learned the Pygmies may have another one of the animals. If you can give me some money. I'll go to their camp and see if I can buy it."

"I shall go! Which camp?"

"No. They do not trust you; Etoundi has told them lies about you. I must go alone. They know me."

Hiroko nodded sadly. "Yes. How much money do you need? Are you certain they have another one?"

"No, I am not certain. They may be lying. But they will not fool me as easily as they would you. I think I will need at least twenty thousand. That is what Johnny wanted from Etoundi and didn't get. Maybe more. Since you told him it was worth more."

Hiroko nodded and went to take the money from her handbag. She gave Aunt Nyah thirty thousand. "This is all I can spare now. But if you really do find another of the animals, I can get more money from my director. Even a dead corpse would be valuable to us."

Aunt Nyah stood up and smiled, looking smug and mischievous. "I shall stay in the Pygmy camp. I shall be living with them."

Hiroko gave her a puzzled frown. "I thought you would go to the city. Life with the Pygmies would be hard on you. What if they won't have you?"

Aunt Nyah wrinkled her nose in distaste. "What would an old woman like me do in the city? Besides, the Mammy wagons stink. The little men have gentle hearts; they will not chase me away. They like my fried pastries, and I know how to bandage their children's cuts and sores. They won't let me starve." She grinned. "I'll eat meat more often than I did in the village."

Hiroko remained sober. "When the hunting is good. They are not like your people. They are different; they do not stay long in one place. I cannot believe you will stay with them."

"Why not? They will not beat me and send me away. I have been to the city and seen the filthy, crazy old women who sleep on porches and scare little children. I saw them begging in front of the stores and quarreling with dogs over garbage. No. The Pygmies will be kinder to me than that."

"I hope so. I feel responsible. If there is anything I can do to help you. . . ."

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Aunt Nyah said nothing, but she smiled. She could feel the fragile creature under her breasts beginning to feed again.

During the morning a Pygmy hunter came to the mission to sell smoked meat. He agreed to lead Aunt Nyah to his camp.

She walked behind him on a narrow path that had been traced by forest buffalo going to a stream to drink. What few belongings she could carry were tied up in a bundle that balanced on top of her head. The tin chest remained behind in the mission. Pygmies did not encumber themselves with useless goods. She would have to learn to share their indifference.

As she walked, she devised how to send the money she had with her to Madjoli's son. The head wife had taken a great risk; it would not be unrewarded. Nyah did not worry about lying to Hiroko. Foreigners had more money than they knew what to do with, anyway. The Japanese girl shouldn't expect her to return with either the creature or the money. If Nyah had asked for money for herself, Hiroko would probably have given it to her, feeling guilty and embarrassed while the African woman felt humiliated. Nyah smiled. The story about bargaining with the Pygmies for another one of the strange beasts permitted both friends to save face. Hiroko was more of an accomplice than a dupe.

The hunter stopped and signed to her for silence. She traced his rapt gaze to a dense black shadow in the lower branches of an azobe tree. It coughed once, a loud, cavernous noise; Nyah realized that she was staring at a gorilla. The Pygmy was raising his rifle, preparing to shoot. Nyah made the sign of the cross. If the hunter missed or merely wounded the ape, it would charge them. One of her cousins had been slapped by a gorilla, and half his face was missing. But Pygmies were fearless and did not hesitate to attack any "beef" they crossed in the forest. Johnny's brother had been killed by an elephant he had attacked alone, armed only with a lance. The family insisted the elephant must have used witchcraft to vanquish such a great hunter.

Something in the higher branches of the azobe grunted and was answered with a guttural snarl from nearby. The Pygmy lowered his rifle without firing and squatted behind a bush. A whole troop of gorillas nested in the trees ahead of them. Nyah imitated the hunter and shrank to the ground, making herself as small as possible, grateful that her guide was not foolish enough to provoke half a dozen adults with their young.

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The gorillas continued their siesta while she and the hunter crouched among the ferns and vines on the forest floor and waited.

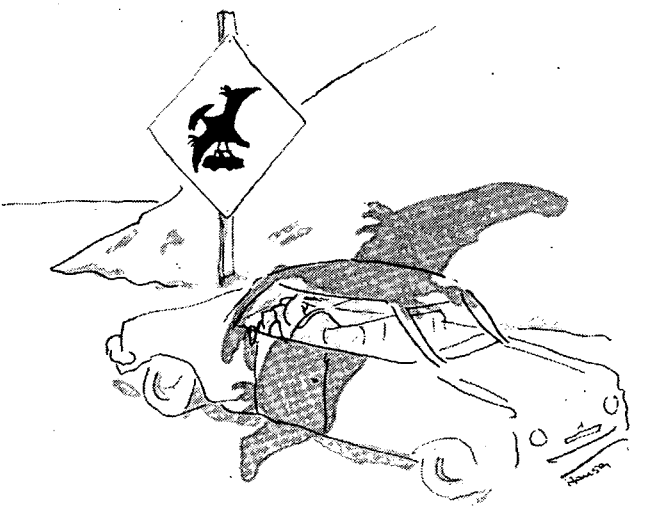
A cub cried out. The gorilla nearest to them grunted quietly to soothe it. Nyah studied the dark mass among the leaves more closely. The cub whimpered again, and they heard greedy slurping noises. She could make out the mother's head bent over its infant. The beast's powerful shoulders and arms formed a protective circle around its nursing cub. Nyah recognized the fierce devotion of its attitude.

Her hidden passenger stirred. She felt one of its mouths open and cling to her skin, then release its hold in a sleepy, affectionate embrace. She cradled it tenderly. She would protect the small creature both from Etoundi and from the foreign scientists who would keep it in a cage. Life with the Pygmies would be harsh, but it would afford her some dignity and the seclusion she needed to care for the creature.

The mother gorilla swung to the ground with her little one clinging to her waist. The rest of the band imitated her, grunting quietly among themselves. Soon the huge beasts were moving away, going deeper into the forest.

The Pygmy waited until they had been out of sight for several minutes before he stood. He shook his head and grinned with regret. "*Na fine beef, dat!*"

She nodded, laughing at his greed, and they resumed their journey.



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Chet Williamson ("Miss Tuck and the Gingerbread Boy," May 1988) here presents an eerie tale in the Gothic tradition. "Eternal Ties" is the story of a kind of love that will accept no boundaries, not even those set by death. . .

Eternal Ties

By Chet Williamson

IT WAS A bizarre idea to begin with. No good could have come of it. Imagine him standing there, holding one end of that thick white ribbon that trailed down under the ground, its other end in the hand of a corpse, his excuse being, of course, that he loved her and simply didn't want to let her go.

I suppose he did love her in his own way, a selfish, grasping way though it was. He was selfish about everything. What made it so absurd was that he never had to sweat a day to earn his wealth. He had been pampered and spoiled since his birth, so it seemed doubly odd that he should be so penurious upon attaining his station. That is a quality of self-made men, who have known the strains of poverty and are determined not to undergo them again. Michael Holcombe *should* have been the young rakehell, the second-generation, devil-may-care laddie who squanders Daddy's hard-earned money on trifles, which he then proceeds to strew amidst his less affluent companions. Yet Michael never did anything of the sort, choosing as his few friends those who were as

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conservative as himself, though hardly as niggardly. Perhaps since riches had come so easily to him, he feared that they might as readily vanish.

And it was not only money with which he was mean — it was attention as well. In any gathering, he needed to be the centerpiece, just as he had demanded his mother's notice on the times I accompanied him home from school. His father, a great florid hulk of a man who never seemed comfortable with his nouveau riche situation, sat completely ignored at the dinner table, while Michael's mother doted only on him, begging him to tell her all about school, praising his slightest accomplishment (she once cried out in delight that he had scored fourth in a Latin examination), and only on brief occasions acknowledging that there were others at the table. She made frequent nods at me as a guest, but to her husband, never.

Instead of being embarrassed by this cloying amount of maternal attention, Michael encouraged it, and would not retire for the night or go out on the town (the few times we did) without first visiting his mother in her bedroom and bidding her a lengthy good-night. In time the situation made me fairly ill, and by the middle of our junior year, I begged off his invitations.

His mother died when we were seniors, and he wept for hours when the news came. After the first spasms of grief had passed, he insisted on leaving immediately for Irondale (the family estate — his father had made his fortune in iron), and begged me to go with him.

"I need a friend," he told me. "My father doesn't understand. He never has. He never loved her." I was well caught up on my studies, and felt it my duty to go, since he had been my roommate for the past three years. I suppose I felt, too, that it would be a lark to get away from the campus for a while.

It was anything but. Michael was in torment the entire time, and the other passengers on the train stared at us all the way to our station. Fortunately, the carriage that met us was closed, so that Briggs, the Holcombe coachman, could not stare and wonder at the incessant amount of grief to which I was sole witness.

It unmanned me to see him in such straits. There was nothing I could say or do that could stanch the ceaseless flow of tears that ran from him, and it was not until he confronted his white-faced father as we stepped from the carriage that the springs dried up and were replaced by what I

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can only describe as a seething hatred for the man who had sired him.

"I'm glad to see you home, Michael," his father said. He seemed to have lost weight. His face was pale and drawn, and he had aged greatly since the last time I saw him.

"Are you now?" Michael replied in a withering tone. "Are you really?" And with that he brushed past his father and into the house.

I mentioned something to the old gentleman about Michael's state ever since he had heard the news, and his father thanked me for my concern, welcomed me, and urged me to make myself comfortable. He was a hospitable man and a kind one.

When I rejoined Michael, I found him in a state of rage, walking about his room as though too furious to light in one spot. "Glad to see me home," he snarled. "Damn him, *he* knows, *he* knows!"

"Knows what?"

"That I know he killed her!"

"Killed her?" I replied, astonished. "But it was apoplexy. That's what the message said."

"Oh yes," he replied, and flecks of foam on his lips warned me of his near madness. "It may have been apoplexy, but he drove her to it, I know he did, always at her, always so jealous of me, jealous. . . ."

A cold hand gripped my heart then, and I urged him to drink some brandy, hoping that it would calm him and stop his unhealthy babbling. Eventually it did, and he fell asleep in a chair.

Michael would not speak to his father during the visit. The old man bore the snub graciously, though had it been I, I fear I would have thrashed the boy, who seemed to think that his was the only grief worth considering, and his father and mother had been only nodding acquaintances. That the old man grieved, I was certain, for I had heard him sobbing that first evening as I passed the door to his rooms.

The funeral was agonizing. When Michael entered the room, he threw himself over the encoffined body, weeping as though his heart had burst. His tortured motions dislodged the hands of the corpse from the position in which the undertaker had placed them, and they flopped listlessly against the polished mahogany of the casket. The father, tears in his eyes, put his arms around the boy, half comforting, half endeavoring to draw him away so that the body might be restored to its previous dignity.

Michael's reaction to the embrace was alarming. He growled like an

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animal and shook himself free, glaring. At the moment I confess I hated my friend, despite his pitifully unbalanced state.

At length the mourners filed in, the service began, and Michael sat in the front row next to his father, but in truth as near to him as to the farthest star. He controlled himself during the reading of fragile comforts, and it was not until they were to bear the body to the hearse that his stony facade began once more to crack. After the final farewells, Mr. Meacham, the undertaker, closed the coffin lid and secured it. As he did, a cry of anguish came from deep within Michael, who swayed as if he would fall at any moment. I grabbed one arm, and a cousin of his secured him from the other side, until he was able to stand on his own once more. We took our places in the procession while Meacham and his men carried the coffin to the hearse.

Michael's mother was to be buried on the Irondale estate, the first occupant of the new private cemetery Mr. Holcombe had established specifically for her interment. The stonemasons had just completed the wall the day before, although the iron gate had yet to be fitted. The plot of land was several hundred yards behind the house, abutting the thick woods that sought to encircle the open grounds. The cemetery itself was roughly twenty by twenty-five yards square, much of which space was taken up by an oak tree, whose massive girth provided ample indication of its age. When I remarked upon the majesty of the tree at a later time to Michael's father, he answered by saying that he always liked the thought of spending eternity beneath the cool shade of a mighty oak, sheltered from sun and rain alike.

When the procession, five coaches in number excluding the hearse, arrived at the cemetery after making its way over the makeshift dirt road, Michael had reverted to his former near hysteria. As the only son, he was expected to bear the pall on the front left side of the coffin, his father on the right, but his overwhelming grief made him worse than useless, so that he hung helplessly on the iron handles, only adding to the burden of the corpse that weighed down his father and uncles and cousins, grunting Simons of Arimathea carrying both Christ and his cross to Calvary.

Michael's *via dolorosa* was thankfully far shorter, and the coffin was soon placed on the bier with a dull thud. The undertaker's men passed three strong white ribbons underneath the coffin, and the burial prayers were read. At their conclusion the men lowered the coffin into the grave

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until the box touched bottom. I glanced at Michael and saw that his eyes were dancing with a wild light as he gazed in awe at the ribbons in the hands of the undertaker's men. Then, as they tossed them into the grave, he gave a short gasp, but said nothing. Looking back, I suppose that was when the idea first came to him.

None of the family remained to watch the grave filled in, although I suspect that Michael wanted to. But his endurance was at an end, and I think he realized that he could not have borne the sight and sound of dirt rattling down upon his mother's coffin, forever replacing his warm embrace with the earth's cold and damp one.

I returned to school the following day, and Michael followed in another week. He was still nearly prostrate with grief, yet, when I attempted to sympathize with him, he feigned indifference, smiled wanly at me, and told me not to be concerned.

It was because of this same grief that I was amazed at the swift and unexpected inception of Michael's relationship with Lydia Miles. Not that there was a thing wrong with the girl — indeed, she was too good for Michael, as events later would prove. Though not especially attractive, there was nothing in the least repellent about her features, and her amiable disposition and genteel nature had already caused more than one young man to propose marriage. However, she met all comers with a neutrality just this side of coolness — all comers, that is, until Michael Holcombe.

I am not sure even now what it was in Lydia's character that drew Michael to her so strongly, but I suspect it was her greatness of heart that translated so easily into the unspoken sympathy he required at that time. Her money was surely no lure to him, as his family was far above the Mileses in that respect, Lydia's father being only a prosperous merchant with just enough to send a daughter to college comfortably.

It was that sympathy that radiated from her, I feel certain, that provided the candle to Michael's moth, a sympathy and concern that bore the unmistakable similarity of a mother or older sister to a frequently depressed little boy. After their marriage, in moments of supposed intimacy, I heard him address her as "Mummy," and heard her prefix her reply with an endearing "Sonny."

What is more inexplicable is what Lydia found in Michael that fulfilled her existence as his wife. I can only surmise that her desire for

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motherhood was equal to Michael's need for a woman who would serve as both wife and mother. Of course, the worth of his estate was considerable, and since Michael's coming of age coincided almost precisely with his father's death (the old man was tossed by a spirited horse), she was able to attain the position of one of the state's great houses at the tender age of twenty, a temptation to which any number otherwise unmercenary and circumspect young ladies might succomb.

So it was that one month to the day after Michael's father was interred beside his wife in the small cemetery behind Irondale, Lydia and Michael were wed in the great hall of the main house. The guests consisted of family from both sides, with a few others present. I served as best man, and was delighted when the wedding went smoothly, with no accidents, no fumbling and dropping the rings. Not a drop was spilled from the bridal cup, a sure sign of a long and happy marriage. We had no way of knowing how quickly superstition would be forced to hide its foolish face from the cruel light of truth.

The marriage seemed at first to be successful. Michael was fortunate in that the business affairs he found so tiresome were securely placed in the hands of Mr. Johnstone, his father's business manager, leaving Michael free to enjoy his leisurely life of a country gentleman. As chance would have it, I found myself in a similar position, and so accepted Michael's frequent invitations to Irondale, spending much time there riding and hunting in the company of Michael and Lydia.

I have already spoken of Michael's penuriousness, but the year following his marriage was the exception to this general rule. Though never profligate, his spirit was comparatively free and generous at this time, and he held parties at which large quantities of fine food and expensive drink were consumed.

There was a price, however, that the guests at these soirees had to pay, and that the price of attention. Michael ruled these gatherings like a sun king with his moon bride at his side, receiving the flatteries of the courtiers with a smugly smiling acceptance that bordered on contempt. He accepted their adulation as his due, and I must admit that I was amused by them, though I never participated in such sycophancy myself, and often chided Michael about it, a scoffing Apemantus to his Timon. I suspect he held such gatherings to impress Lydia with his wealth and the high regard in which the yokels held him, like a child showing off in front of his mother.

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Then, roughly two years from the time they were wed, Lydia became pregnant, and Michael's sunny disposition entered an eclipse from which it was never to emerge. I could tell that the joy with which he wrote me the news was feigned, but it was not until I saw him, in the seventh month of Lydia's pregnancy, that I realized the cause of his trepidation. It was apparent that he regarded the child not as a blessing and an heir, but as a rival for Lydia's affections. Although he made me overwhelmingly aware of this feeling, I dared not accuse him in words of such arrant selfishness. Indeed, he may have been unaware of his own true feelings, and been horrified and shocked by my intimations.

So, rather than speak what I felt to be the truth, I collaborated in his lies, sympathetically clucking over the restraints that the child would put on his activities, yet at the same time reminding him that fatherhood was an honorable activity in itself, and that through our children we retained our immortality on Earth as our souls would do in Heaven.

I was abroad at the time of the child's birth, and visited Irondale shortly after my return. The child was five months then, beautiful and robust. It was a boy, and they had named him Lyndon Miles, the Miles for Lydia's family, and Lyndon at Michael's insistence as a variation of Lydia's name. Lydia was radiant as she showed me the baby, and I knew that her true purpose of life, motherhood, had been fulfilled. Michael was far less demonstrative toward the child and showed more of a curious disinterest than any paternal affection.

That first evening, when Lydia and the child's nurse were going through the timeless ceremony of putting the child to bed, Michael and I sat in the drawing room smoking our cigars, and I asked him how it felt to be a father.

"Lonely," he said, and smiled. It was a bitter smile, and for some reason it frightened me.

"Lonely?" I said. "But before, you had only a wife. Now you have a child as well. How then lonely?"

He puffed thoughtfully at his cigar before he answered. "Lydia spends much of her time with the child." In speaking of the boy, Michael always referred to him as *the child*, never as Lyndon. "I hardly see her anymore." His tone was low, as if loath to reveal this childish illusion of abandonment.

I responded by saying that his time with Lydia could be more precious than ever now, by sharing the countless chores and joys that went with

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caring for a baby. Most men, I averred, were unfortunately bound to their work, and viewed their children only rarely, while he was at liberty to actually participate in his son's upbringing. Such things were easy for me to say, being at that time a childless bachelor.

He was unresponsive to my cajolements, and we lapsed into silence, being joined by a tired but happy Lydia a short time later. As she reported on the evening's activity, I was the only one who responded to her enthusiastic descriptions, and an air of discomfort quickly settled over the room, dispersed only by our leaving it to go to our bedrooms.

In the days that followed, I was dismayed to find Michael's attitude that of a spoiled little boy sulking at the lack of attention accorded him. Lydia noticed it, too — it would have been impossible not to — and tried to spend as much time with Michael as possible, mostly when the baby slept. But this was not enough for Michael, and his sour mood continued, so that I quickly wearied of his company and would have cut short my visit had I a proper excuse. The time allotted slowly passed, and at last I took my leave of what should have been a happy family picture, hoping with all my heart that Michael would come out of his funk enough to enjoy the lovely wife and smiling child with which God had blessed him.

I continued my contact with Michael through letters, and although I often inquired after the boy's development, the responses were always curt and uninformative. At times, Lydia added a few lines to acquaint me with Lyndon's progress. From these brief snatches I learned that the boy was growing rapidly and resembled his father to an uncanny degree — the same coal-black hair, pale and luminous eyes, and thin figure, in sharp contrast to Lydia's own full-fleshed blondeness.

As the months turned to years, I found myself taking more of an interest in my family's business, to the point where it grew difficult to slip away on extended visits to distant friends. So it was that three years passed before I again saw Michael. I wish now I had not, that when my carriage left Irondale on that previous visit, that I had ridden out of his life forever. But friendships early made are late to die, and, unlike myself, Michael had made no new friends since university days. Toadies he had had in abundance, but the parties at his house had long since ended; the revelers, deprived of their host's bounty, fled like leaves before the storm. When Michael drank, he drank alone and overmuch.

All this I learned later; the letters we exchanged every few months

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held no hint of the disquietude that ruled Michael's life, save for his reticence to discuss his son. So it was that his telegram came upon me so unexpectedly that it was like a blow to the heart, and I wept as I read it. It said:

> Lyndon is dead. Lydia is ill. I beg you come at once.
> Michael

I left in the time it took to pack my bags and arrived at Irondale in three days. They were days of misery spent waiting in frustration for late trains, dozing with my head against the coach's chill window until dreadful dreams awoke me, eating a few bites of food when hunger at last overruled my sickness of heart. I wondered a thousand times at the cause of the boy's death — typhus? Influenza? Smallpox? I discounted such long-term ills as consumption, for surely Michael or Lydia would have mentioned it in the letter I had received from them only two weeks before. It could have, I thought, been any one of a myriad things. We humans are all such fragile bits of flesh and bone, and children seem the weakest of all. I prayed for the boy's soul, and for Lydia's recovery, and for poor Michael's ability to bear it all, for well I knew from his mother's death the depths to which grief could take him.

At long last I stepped off the train and found Briggs, Michael's coachman, waiting for me. Throwing my bag within, I climbed up next.to him and prodded him with questions as we rode. The young master had died, he said, tears in his eyes, of a fall, not a sickness at all.

"A fall," Briggs said softly, his voice thick with sorrow, "just like his dear grandfather, God bless and keep them both." When I asked how it happened, he told me that the boy and his mother and father had been walking a woodland trail behind the estate, and the boy had slipped and fallen off the trail and down a steep incline riddled with shards of slate. "Cut him up fierce, it did," Briggs sniveled. "Poor little thing. Doctor didn't know whether it was the fall or the bleeding killed him."

I closed my eyes in horror and tried to steel myself for the grief that I knew would hang over the Holcombes. "Mrs. Holcombe," I said. "She's ill?"

"Yes, sir, but not in body, if you get my meaning."

"Her mind?" I inquired.

"Crushed with grief she was, sir. She doesn't eat or sleep. Couldn't even

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come to the funeral, she was so weak. Took to bed the day it happened and hasn't gotten up since." He shook his small, ferretlike head. "She thought the sun rose and set on that child, sir. Unless she changes, she won't live long, I'm afraid."

"Won't eat, you say?"

"Not a bite, sir. Only water."

"How is Mr. Holcombe?"

Briggs's expression altered oddly at this point, his eyes narrowing and his mouth pressing itself into a firm line. "He's bearing up, sir." That was all.

"Bearing up? That's surprising. I remember the death of his mother."

"He's not like that now, sir. Not at all. He's bearing up all right."

"Taking care of Mrs. Holcombe?"

"Never leaves her side, sir. Just for the funeral."

"Where was Lyndon interred?"

"The cemetery out back, sir, by his grandparents."

We spoke no more and soon arrived at the estate. A servant took my bags, and another showed me up to Lydia's room, where Michael was sitting beside the bed where she lay. Her appearance was shocking, her formerly full face now thin and white, as though the life had been drained from her. Her eyes were closed, and I fancied she was already dead, before I noticed her chest rising and falling in quick, shallow bursts. Michael looked fit enough, though the dark patches under his eyes testified to long periods of wakefulness. He held up a finger to me and quietly rose from Lydia's bedside, not speaking until we were both in the hall, the door closed behind us.

"She's sleeping now," he said, and I was amazed to find a slight smile on his features. "She'll sleep for a bit. Do her good. Come." He led me downstairs into the drawing room, where he drew us two brandies from the sideboard.

"When did it happen?" I asked as he pressed the glass into my hand. "Lyndon?"

"Eight days ago," he said, sitting next to me on the chaise. "I apologize for the abruptness of my message. I was quite upset. Didn't know to whom I could turn. Not these bumpkins around here, certainly. And you've been a good friend, Richard, even though we've not seen each other for some time."

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"Of course," I said. "How is Lydia? Truly?"

Michael looked away as though embarrassed. "She'll live; I feel sure of it. Losing the boy was an awful blow to her, but she'll get over it. She'll eat soon. She'll have to, or she'll starve, and she wouldn't do that — she couldn't, couldn't leave me."

The final three words were spoken in a whisper, as though not for my hearing. But they were loud enough for me to realize with a chill that, even in the face of his son's death and his wife's sickness, it was himself for whom he was primarily concerned, and I wondered again how I could have made such a man my friend.

"How did it happen, Michael?" I asked, and he looked at me as though puzzled. "Lyndon. How did Lyndon fall?"

"Oh," he said carelessly, as though he had told the story a dozen times before and was bored with it by now. "It was damp that day when we went walking, Lydia and the child and I. We often went for walks, as Lydia thought the child enjoyed them. For myself, I could never detect any particular merriment from him. He was a stolid little boy. Though of course I loved him deeply," he added, almost as an afterthought. "At any rate, Lydia got winded and sat on a rock to rest and told me to take the boy on ahead and she'd meet us at the pond — you know the one — just at the edge of the pines. There were ducks there, and the boy liked feeding them.

"So the boy and I walked on. As we came upon that ledge of slate around the bend, I noticed that his shoe buckle was undone and ordered him to fix it. His buckles were *always* becoming undone, Richard, and Lydia never seemed to notice. It was always up to me to correct him. So he knelt down to buckle it.

"It was my fault, I suppose. With the slickness of the path, I should have held onto him to steady him, but I thought I heard a buck tramping through the brush and stepped toward the noise. It was then I heard the boy gasp, and when I turned back, he was sliding helplessly toward the edge in the slick mud. I tried to run to his side, but it was too late. He was already over, sliding and bouncing down the incline. I went over myself, half stepping, half sliding after him, but I could not catch him in his headlong rush, and by the time I was at his side, it was too late. He was bleeding from a dozen cuts, and his little bones were shattered." Michael drew a long, shuddering breath. "It was horrible. I don't know how long I stood looking down at him, but finally I heard a long, drawn-out shriek

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The cry cut through the house, and as it did, the blood drained from Michael's face...

that sent the birds bursting from the trees in terror. I looked up, and saw Lydia on the trail above. She was so overcome that it seemed as though her whole body were being shaken by a giant hand. At last she dropped from my view, and when I scrambled to the top of the incline, I found her lying in a swoon.

"There was nothing I could do for the child, so I picked up Lydia and carried her to the house, and sent Briggs for the doctor and some of the others to bring back the boy. Lydia awoke weeping. By that time the doctor had arrived, and I told him the whole story in Lydia's presence. She was . . . quite angry with me, asking me why I hadn't been watching him more closely. What excuse could I give? I had been careless, fatally so, and *I* was the one who would have to live with that, not she. Still, she became horribly abusive, accusing me of vile things and calling me horrible names. The doctor gave her some powders then to make her sleep, and told me not to take her ravings to heart, that she was hysterical and God knows what else. I tried to tell myself he was right, but hearing such words from the woman you love, well, it was hard.

"From then on she would not eat. She's kept to her bed and wouldn't go to the funeral." He laughed bitterly. "She'll barely talk to me. After she came partly to her senses, the first thing she did was untie her hair ribbon — a thin blue ribbon it was — and hand it to me. 'Put it in his hands,' she said, almost as if she were dreaming. 'Put it in his little hands.'"

Michael sat there, staring at the wall. "And did you?" I asked him.

He looked at me oddly. "Yes," he said. "Yes. That was when I sent you the message. She wouldn't talk to me; I didn't know what to do. Thank you for coming." He smiled at me openly, like a child. "It'll be all right, now that you're here."

It was as though nature itself screamed in denial. The cry cut through the house, and as it did, the blood drained from Michael's face until it resembled a white mask. "What in God's name!" I cried, leaping to my feet, and then I was following Michael as he ran out the door, down the hall, and up the stairs to Lydia's room.

A housemaid was standing trembling just outside Lydia's doorway, and

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Michael brutally pushed her aside so that she fell to the carpet. I must confess that I did not pause to assist her, but dashed past and into the room, where I nearly collided with an astonished Michael.

Lydia was hanging from the chandelier. Her gallows rope was made of bed sheets twisted and knotted together; her scaffold had been the high wardrobe from which she had apparently thrown herself. Her face was a deep and mottled blue.

Michael gave a choked cry and ran to where she swung only inches from the floor. He embraced her and lifted her upward to relieve the tension on her neck. From the way her head lolled, I could tell the neck was broken.

"Lydia!" he screamed, and then louder, "Lydia!", as though the strength of his grief might be enough to bring her back. He staggered, still clinging to her unhearing corpse, and the additional weight tore out the bolts that were by this time just barely holding up the chandelier, so that it fell in a cloud of plaster dust on the man and woman beneath. A loop of curved iron struck Michael sharply on the back, knocking the air from his lungs with a painful gasp, and he sank to the floor, Lydia atop him in a bizarre union.

I lifted the chandelier off them and rolled Lydia onto her back, loosening the bed-sheet noose as I did so. Glancing at Michael, I saw he was conscious and his eyes were open, but he was staring at the ceiling, his skin paler than ever, and drops of sweat were beading his face. I turned my attention back to Lydia then, grasping her wrist and feeling for a pulse, but there was none. She was quite dead.

"Michael," I said. "Michael, are you all right?" But he could not answer, and I feared he had gone into a state of apoplexy. The housemaid was standing in the doorway, looking on stupidly. "Get a doctor!" I shouted at her. "Send Briggs! Hurry!"

She disappeared, and I remained with Michael. A minute later the chief domestic, Mrs. Hutchins, and a manservant appeared in the doorway. "Mr. Lansford," she babbled at me, "what on earth. . . ."

"Mrs. Holcombe has hanged herself," I said.

"Nooo. . . ." It was a low groan from Michael.

"Has a doctor been called?" I asked.

"Briggs has gone. Oh dear, oh dear. . . ."

"Help me get him to his room."

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But Michael would not be taken from Lydia. When we moved toward him, he scuttled crablike until he lay next to her, and placed his hand on her breast. "No, no," he cried, "leave us alone. Oh *why*," he said, sobbing. "Why *did* you? *I* am still here! He's gone, but *I'm* still here, oh Mummy Mummy Mummy, Sonny's here, all alone now. . . . Oh Mummy, why? . . ."

I could bear no more, and turned away. To have lost both wife and son, I thought, small wonder his mind might snap, reverting him to such childish mewling. yet there was something in it that was impure, almost filthy, and I closed the drawing room doors behind me with relief, and poured myself a burning draft of brandy.

The doctor said later that Michael was in no danger from the fall of the chandelier, for it had left only a small bruise. He confided to me that it was Michael's sanity he feared for. Michael had refused to leave Lydia's corpse, and it was with great difficulty that the doctor persuaded Michael to allow him to cover the grimacing face with a sheet. Yet when I entered the room after the doctor had left and before the undertaker had arrived, I found that Michael had removed the sheet from over the face, and was standing looking down at it, tears coursing over his cheeks the same way they had when his mother had died.

"Michael," I said softly, but he either did not hear or pretended not to, so I closed the door and left him alone. When the undertaker arrived, I led him upstairs. Though nearly two hours had passed, Michael was still in his former position, his weeping showing no signs of subsidence.

"Michael," I said, "Mr. Meacham is here."

He spoke without looking up. "You shall not take her away from here."

"Michael. . . ." I was chilled by the implications of what he said. Were we to have to bind him in order to take away the corpse for burial?

"Not to town. You must leave her here. Do what you have to here, nowhere else. She will not leave here." His voice was low and cold, belying the look of wretched agony on his face.

I turned a questioning glance to the undertaker, who nodded shortly.

Mrs. Hutchins and I made the arrangements. We cleared everything through Michael, although he seemed not to hear half the things to which he dully nodded agreement. Among the few demands he did make, one was extremely hard on Mr. Meacham, the undertaker.

Meacham told me that since the funeral was scheduled for the next day, he would have to begin work immediately on Lydia. He had his knives

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and hoses and paint in readiness, and whatever other tools of the trade undertakers use, and assured me that all could be done without removing Lydia's body from the house. But when the time came for Michael to leave the room, he flatly refused, saying that he would not leave her now, nor be separated from her by death. Those were his exact words. Of course, I suspected he was referring to suicide, but, hesitant to bring forth such an accusation to one already in a dangerous mental state, I merely said, "Michael, please, do you know what you're saying?"

He smiled thinly. "Not the way you think," he said. "Not what you think."

He would not be persuaded to leave Lydia's side, and I could tell that Mr. Meacham was growing greatly agitated. So I suggested a compromise by which Michael could remain in the room on the other side of a dressing screen while Meacham did his work.

"Then I should not be able to embalm her," Meacham protested. "I need access to—"

"No embalming," Michael said, interrupting.

"But. . . ."

"No embalming," he repeated in a tone that brooked no refusal. I helped erect the screen and then left the room.

Two hours later, when Meacham reappeared, he was quite pale, and his clothes were drenched with sweat. "It was . . . oh, I never want to go through anything like that again," he said. "Mr. Holcombe kept *talking* all the time I was working, talking to Mrs. Holcombe, things like he wouldn't let me hurt her. *Me.* And once, as I was washing her, he looked over the screen, just stopped talking and looked over, gave me *such* a start when I saw him staring at me. Oh, Mr. Lansford, I'm concerned about him, really I am — I'm afraid he's lost his mind, sir."

"All right, all right, Mr. Meacham," I said. "Just sip some brandy now. Mr. Holcombe's upset, but he'll come around. No need to speak of it to others, eh?"

"No, no, no, surely not. Surely not," he said, imbibing the liquor. Telling him to pour himself another glass, I went upstairs to see Michael.

In spite of the less than ideal circumstances he'd had to work under, Meacham had done a satisfactory job. Lydia was freshly clothed in a blue lace dress, her hair cleaned and brushed, and, although her face bore a deathly waxen pallor accented with counterfeit pink highlights, at least

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the features were now expressionless, the death agonies gone. It was acceptable.

Michael was sitting on the bed next to her, his eyes finally dry, a fatuous smile turning up the corners of his mouth.

"She looks quite nice now, doesn't she?" he said. I agreed that she did. "Would you call Mrs. Hutchins for me, please?" he asked.

"Of course," I replied. "Michael, are you feeling all right? Would you like a drink or. . . ."

"No, I feel fine now. I know how to keep her with me."

"Keep her. . . ."

"Call Mrs. Hutchins, please."

I did as he asked. Mrs. Hutchins spent only a minute in the room with him, and when she reappeared, I asked her what Michael had said.

"He asked for a ribbon." She shook her head as though puzzled. "A white ribbon. He said it should be thick and strong, about twenty feet in length. Said he wanted it for tomorrow."

"For the funeral?" I wondered aloud.

"I don't know, sir."

I reentered the room. Michael was sitting on the bed, holding Lydia's dead hand in his own. "I spoke to Mrs. Hutchins just now. Michael, what do you mean to do with the ribbon?"

"Bind her to me."

"I don't understand."

"She tried to leave me. If I'd known, I'd never have. . . ." He paused, then went on. "She tried, but she won't. You'll see. Tomorrow you'll see."

Try as I would, I could draw no more from him. He spent the night in her room, and if he slept, I shudder to think what he slept beside.

In the morning he would not leave her room. A servant came to wash and dress him for the funeral. He had further ordered that Lydia's grave be dug at the foot of the oak tree itself, "to keep the rain from her," as he put it. The gravediggers had a time of it with the roots, but finished that morning nonetheless.

By noon the few mourners had arrived, Holcombe relatives only, as Lydia's father had taken ill from the news of his daughter's and only grandchild's deaths, and so was unfit to travel. A few minutes after noon, Meacham and his assistants carried the open coffin into the front parlor, followed by a dry-eyed Michael, and the brief service commenced. Michael

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paid no attention to the minister's words, but merely sat gazing at Lydia's face. I could detect a large bulge in his suit pocket, to which his hand often strayed as if to ensure himself of its presence. Though I suspected it was the ribbon he had requested of Mrs. Hutchins, I was not sure until we arrived at the little cemetery. Once there, he ordered the coffin opened one last time.

Meacham was hesitant, but did as commanded. Michael then took from his pocket a long white ribbon, one end of which he wound twice around Lydia's dead yellow hand and knotted. He kissed her cheek, whispered something that no one else could hear, and stepped back. For a moment he stood there, holding the ribbon and looking at her face as though to fix the memory for eternity. Then he commanded the lid of the coffin to be replaced, and closed his eyes, not opening them again until he heard the sound of wood on wood.

As the coffin was lowered into the grave, he trailed the ribbon after, so that when the box reached the earth six feet below, Michael still held nearly fifteen feet of ribbon in his hand. Meacham stood uncomfortably at the graveside, looking down, following the white ribbon from where it crept from beneath the coffin lid up to where Michael stood holding it, a ghost of a smile on his face.

"Fill it in," Michael said quietly, then turned to the mourners. "You may go," he said.

The small group turned back to the house, their concern and confusion evident. I accompanied them as far as the gate, but stopped there and watched as the grave was filled in, covering the coffin and the five feet of ribbon that led upward, linking Michael's hand with the hand of his dead wife.

After Meacham and the gravediggers left, Michael stood there for a while longer, then knelt and placed the roll of ribbon atop the freshly dug earth. He showed no surprise on finding me there waiting for him, and put his hand on my shoulder in a strangely warm gesture.

"You understand now," he said.

"I see," I replied, "but I don't understand."

"You've never loved, then."

"I have not," I agreed.

"It is a bond between Lydia and myself," he said. "She tried to break that bond by what she did to herself, but only because her mind was troubled,

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because she could not bear the grief of losing the boy. Had she not done so, with time, we would have grown together once more. This way," — he pointed at the ribbon — "we can be together still. All I need do is pick up that ribbon, and I know she holds the other end."

I did not know what to make of it. It was terribly macabre, almost horrible, yet it seemed to comfort him.

"I can talk to her now," he went on, oblivious to my presence. "I can explain things." Then he turned to me as though a spell that had been holding him was broken. "Let's go back to the house."

As we walked together, snow began to fall, and the sky changed from a murky gray to an even more dismal slate. Nearly all the funeral guests had gone, and Michael did not speak to the few who remained, but went directly to his room.

I spent the afternoon seated by the window in the library, watching the snow fall heavily and feeling exceedingly grateful for the fire blazing on the hearth. Since Michael did not join me, I ate alone, then retired to my room, planning to start for home the next morning as early as tact would permit. I had had quite enough of Irondale and Michael Holcombe both. It was a place of loss, yet, in spite of what Michael claimed, loss without love.

I had just begun to undress, when Mrs. Hutchins knocked at my door. She seemed quite upset. "It's Mr. Holcombe, sir," she said. "He's gone out in the storm."

"In the storm? Good God, where?"

"I'm not sure, sir, but I think it may be the cemetery. There's nothing else in back of the house, and that's the direction he took."

"Have Briggs saddle me a horse," I ordered, "and fetch me a lantern." I threw on my coat and hat and drew on my gloves. By the time I reached the door, Briggs had a mare waiting, and Mrs. Hutchins handed me a lantern.

I spurred the beast and began to canter toward the rear of the estate. The snow had slowed somewhat, but the wind still howled, so that I could barely hear the soft, wet sound of hooves on snow. The flakes whirled madly about, tossed by the wind, so that my lantern proved nearly useless. Still, it was with dismay that I watched it flicker and die, victim to Mrs. Hutchins's haste, and I fervently cursed the woman for not taking the time to check the supply of oil.

Blindly, I pushed the horse on toward where I guessed the graveyard

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might be, and in a few moments I heard over the wind the nickering of a frightened horse. I spurred my mare toward the sound, and soon saw a faint, glowing nimbus through the haze of snow. Reining in my mount, I stared ahead until I could make out the shape of the cemetery gate and the massive oak tree, beneath which a figure was standing, illuminated by a lantern hanging from a limb. I dismounted and led the horse up to the gate, and tied it to a birch that trembled like a feather in the wind. The nickering sounded again, over to the left, and though I could not see it, I knew that Michael's horse must be tied to the fence somewhere in the darkness.

Michael himself stood over Lydia's grave. The brown, freshly dug earth was hidden by a shroud of pure white snow whose surface danced in the wind like a storm-tossed sea. The white ribbon was nearly invisible in the whiteness surrounding it, and I could just make out its lineaments about Michael's ungloved hand. I should like to tell myself that I kept my presence a secret from him so as not to interrupt his mourning, but I must confess otherwise. I saw his lips moving, heard snatches of his voice through the shrieking of the wind. And I wondered — wondered what he could possibly have to say to the woman who, quite involuntarily, held the other end of that ribbon. So, hidden by snow and darkness, I stood not ten yards away. I stood and listened, and heard what made my heart turn to stone. I could not hear every word, but I heard enough.

"... could you not understand? I *had* to ... going away from me, hardly ever *looked* at me ... be so cruel? Did you not know how much I needed you? *That* was why ... not plan it, but when I saw him there on the edge, I thought to ... back again as it was before ... pushed him, yes, I did, pushed him away from us, my love ... have you back again, have my dear Mummy back ... dirty boy, how could you care ... only did it for us, so we could be ... could you not understand that? ... but now, now we are bound together forever and ever. ..."

Despite the cold, despite the wind, I felt the blood rush to my cheeks, burning them as Michael's confession burned my soul. He had *hated* the boy, and whether he had actively been looking for the chance or not, he had taken it when it came. The monster. That he had ever borne the title of father now seemed a sin.

I turned in loathing from the sight of him and stumbled back through the snow to my shivering horse. Somehow I found the way back to the

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house and allowed myself to be uncloaked by Mrs. Hutchins, who asked if I had found her master.

"Yes," I replied coldly.

"Is he all right, sir?"

"He's alive." *And would God he were not,* I thought bitterly.

My course was clear. In the morning I would confront him with my knowledge of his crime, tell him what I had overheard, and demand that he go to the police and confess everything. If he did not, I would report his crime myself and bear witness against him. But first I would give him the opportunity to admit it himself. Our former friendship demanded as much and not a jot more, not for a man who had lived his whole life in a grasping selfishness he had thought to be love, a self-serving passion that had heedlessly caused the deaths of two innocents. In a way, I hoped that he would refuse to admit the truth, for with all my heart I wished to see him hang.

I lay awake looking at the fire for a long time, and finally dropped off to sleep just after midnight. I did not hear Michael return, and did not give a tinker's damn if he froze to death out in that bitter wind.

Shortly before two a knock on my door awakened me. It was Mrs. Hutchins, in a state of high alarm. Briggs and two of the stable boys were behind her, no less calm than she. "It's Mr. Holcombe, sir," she said. "His horse has just come back, and he's not on it."

"Snapped the bridle, sir," said Briggs. "Her mouth was foaming and her eyes wide like she was half crazy. Got a boy trying to calm her now. Will you come with us to look for him, sir?"

I dressed quickly, struggling to clear my sleep-fogged mind. Briggs and two of his stableboys were waiting at the front door with a fresh horse for me, and the four of us rode toward the cemetery. The snow had stopped, though the wind had not, and a sickly moon was bright enough to light our way, had Briggs and I not been carrying lanterns. As we neared the cemetery, I saw no light ahead, and assumed that either Michael was gone or his lantern had burned out. We dismounted at the gate and walked in through the deep snow. By my lantern's light I saw Michael standing by Lydia's grave under the huge oak tree.

"Michael," I called, and he turned to answer. But it was the way in which he turned that froze the four of us in our tracks and brought an animal-like whimper of fear from the youngest stableboy.

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Instead of his legs moving, his whole body pivoted, his feet turning like a statue's through the powdery snow. It was then that I realized that his feet were not on the ground as ours were, but were suspended in the first two inches of the foot of snow that blanketed the earth. It was not until I held the lantern near his face, however, that I saw the white ribbon, tied in a knot around his bare neck, going up over the lowest limb of the oak, and down again until it was hidden in the snow directly over Lydia's grave.

"Oh God," I heard Briggs whisper. "Oh dear God. . . ."

The older stableboy looked at Michael's frozen, contorted face in amazement, then followed the ribbon with his eyes until it disappeared into the snow. "It couldn't," he said, his voice quivering. "It's impossible . . . couldn't hold his weight. It would've broke, or come loose down below. It couldn't've held. . . ."

"Help me," I said, lifting up Michael's stiffened corpse to give Briggs slack to untie the knot. He did so, and we lowered the body to the snow, into which it sank as though the elements themselves could not wait to hide it from view.

But our attention was turned away from the piteous sight by the gasp of the younger stableboy, who was gazing at the spot where Michael had hung. We looked, too, and so all saw the white ribbon creep back up and over the limb and fall onto the snow, where it ran in a straight line across the surface and vanished into whiteness, as if pulled by an unseen and retributive hand.

Coming Soon

Next month: "The Ends of the Earth," a major new novella by Lucius Shepard, with a stunning James Gurney cover. Also: Harlan Ellison's Watching, No. 33, a long and fascinating installment about *Alien Nation* and the perils of screenwriting. Don't miss the March issue, on sale February 2.

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Marc Laidlaw's latest is a short and very surprising sf story about the chilling events at the Project company picnic. The author recently moved from San Francisco to Long Island, where he is finishing his current novel, entitled KALIFORNIA.

The Demonstration

By Marc Laidlaw

AS THEY APPROACHED the site of the company picnic, Dewey and his parents saw a crowd of weird-looking people standing along the roadside waving picket signs. Dewey's father muttered, "God damn" under his breath.

"Roll up your window, Dewey," said his mother.

"Who are they?" Dewey asked, putting up the rear window of the station wagon.

"Anarchists," his father said. "They'd like to see us all turned into animals — and worse."

Animals! Dewey wondered. He got up on his knees to see them better. By now the car had slowed to a crawl. Dewey's father sounded the horn. "Get out of the road!" he shouted, though his voice didn't carry with the windows all rolled up.

"Daddy, why do they want us to be animals?"

"It's a figure of speech," Mommy said.

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But the anarchists looked halfway to animal already, like the creatures of Dr. Moreau. They wore their hair long and ragged; their cheeks were slashed with black-and-white zebra stripes, their eyes wild and beseeching. Some of them looked like living skeletons, zombies in tattered clothes.

"There's a spy in the company," Daddy said suddenly.

"That's ridiculous," Mommy said.

"How else could they have learned about the picnic? They're trying to spoil everything — first the Project and now our private lives. God damn them!"

"They have their own beliefs. They're concerned citizens."

"They don't give a damn about civilization."

The skulls and animals lurched toward the car, spilling onto the road now. Dewey jerked back as a woman with long claws raked the window an inch from his face. She screamed into his eyes: "Make them stop! It's your generation that loses! Your own father is killing you!"

Dewey felt his insides turn cold. "Mommy. . . ."

"Don't listen to them, sugar."

The horn blared, and the station wagon sped up. The woman stumbled away, losing hold of her picket sign. Dewey read it as it fell: EVEN NUKES WERE BETTER THAN THIS!

Just ahead was the private gate, standing tall between high bushes. Guards waited there with hands on their holsters. The crowd stayed back on the main road, still shouting and waving signs. The guards stepped aside and let the car pass through, nodding in recognition to Dewey's father. The station wagon rushed down a dusty road between summer-browned oaks, dry-baked hills.

"Daddy," Dewey said, "what's a nuke?"

"You don't need to know," his father said. "They'll soon be obsolete."

As they pulled into the small parking lot among fifty other cars, Dewey saw that the barbecue pits were already smoking and a softball game was under way. Plenty of kids were playing around the picnic tables, but he didn't know any of them. This was the first company picnic since Dewey's father had come to help supervise the Project. There hadn't been time to relax until recently. Daddy was always griping about deadlines. But now the Project was finished. The new power station had been in operation for a week, running smoothly in the nearby hills. At last the

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company had granted its employees an afternoon to picnic with their families.

While his parents unpacked the station wagon, Dewey wandered toward a small group of kids who were kicking a soccer ball between them. He stood at the edge of the game for a few minutes, trying to figure out if there were any rules — until someone kicked the ball too hard, and it flew past Dewey into the heavy underbrush that surrounded the picnic grounds.

Dewey shouted, "I'll get it!"

He plunged into the tangled brambles, thinking that if he retrieved the ball, he could make some friends. The others shouted encouragement as he stooped ever lower; soon he was almost crawling. Then, just ahead of him, he saw the ball. He ignored the thorns that scratched at his face and arms, and pressed forward.

A black hand darted out of the thicket and grabbed at his wrist.

"Hey!" he shouted, tearing himself away.

Something moved inside the hedge, struggling after him. Whoever or whatever it was grew trapped in thorns; the hand fell out of sight. He stumbled backward, terrified. A black hand! It hadn't been the chocolate brown of his own skin; no, it had been the black of something badly burned.

A second later Dewey was free of the bushes. The other kids were waiting for him. "Well, where is it?" asked a tall blond boy.

Dewey couldn't catch his breath. "There's someone in there," he gasped.

"Someone stole our ball, you mean?" said a girl.

He looked back at the bushes, but they were silent, unrustling.

"Naw," said the blond boy, "he's just chicken."

"He does look scared," said another kid.

"You go get it, then!" Dewey said angrily, turning away from them so that his fear would be hidden. He decided that he didn't want to play with them after all. He walked slowly past the picnic table where his mother was setting out plastic bowls full of salad. His father was standing with a few other men, all of them drinking beer in the shade of an old oak tree. Dewey went up to them and waited for his father to notice him.

"Daddy," he said, when the men kept on talking. "Daddy, there's someone in the bushes over there." He pointed, but now saw that the kids had

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their ball back and were kicking it across the dry grass.

"What're you talking about?" his father asked.

Dewey stared at the motionless thicket; there wasn't even a breeze to stir the branches. Suddenly he remembered the people on the road.

"Those animal people," he said.

That got his father's attention. "What do you mean? The anarchists?"

One of the other men laughed. "Those idiots. How did they ever get it into their head that the Project was dangerous?"

"I saw one of them, Daddy. He was—"

"Where?" Dewey's father whirled around, searching the hills, the hedges, the trees. "You saw them, Dewey?"

"Relax, man," said one of the others. "They can't get in here."

"You don't know that," said Dewey's father. "Those people won't stop at protest. They don't respect normal people. I carry a gun now; you'd be crazy not to."

"Come on, who's going to resort to violence over a little thing like a power plant? It's for their own good, even if they don't understand how it works. They're ignorant, that's all. Superstitious. If they really understood tau particles and time/mass transfer, they wouldn't be afraid anymore."

"Believe what you want," said Dewey's father, still eyeing the landscape with suspicion. "You remember how violent the antinuke protests got; or have you forgotten already?"

"Yeah, but that stuff was dangerous. This is safe."

"You can believe *that* if you want, too," said Dewey's father.

"I gotta say," said another man, "they did give me a bit of a scare on the way in. You saw how they were dressed. Kind of reminded me of the nuke protests, the dead-falls. Remember when the protestors used to dress like burned-up corpses and skeletons and fall down dead in the streets?"

"That's what I saw!" Dewey shouted. "Just like that! Down there in the hedge!" He pointed again.

The men laughed among each other, all except Dewey's father.

"Kid's got quite an imagination."

"Dewey doesn't imagine things," his father said.

"I'm telling you, those demonstrators can't get in here. Don't let them ruin your day."

"They already have. Come on, Dewey."

Daddy started back toward the car. As they passed the picnic table,

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Dewey's mother looked up and saw the expression on her husband's face. "Honey? What is it?"

He didn't answer, except to glance sideways at Dewey and say, "Get in the car."

"Why, Daddy?"

"Don't argue, just get in the car."

Dewey slid into the backseat while his father opened the front door and reached under the seat. He straightened and quickly tucked something into his belt; before the shirt covered it, Dewey saw the handle of a gun.

"Daddy?"

"Keep still. I saw something in those bushes, too. More than one. I think we're surrounded, Dewey; that's why I want you to stay in the car. The rest of these fools won't believe me until it's too late. Now I'm going to try and get your mother to come sit with you if I can do it without scaring her. Then we're going to drive out of here the way we came in."

"But Daddy, the picnic—"

"Keep quiet, I said. The picnic doesn't matter."

Dewey's father slammed the door and went striding toward the picnic table. He took hold of Mommy's arm and began to whisper urgently in her ear. Dewey saw her look change from concern to fear and then to irritation. She was about to argue, when a scream caused everyone to turn.

One of the girls playing kickball was standing in the middle of the grass, pointing up at the hills. Dewey saw a black figure come stumbling down through the bushes, a weird man dressed in rags. And he wasn't the only one, either. All of a sudden the hedges and hills were dotted with terrible-looking people; they came staggering toward the picnic tables, pushing through the bushes, howling and scraping at the air. They had left their picket signs behind, demonstrating their protest now with actions instead of words.

The company picnickers moved back toward the car. A woman ran out into the field and grabbed the screaming girl. Panic broke out among the tables. Dewey's father pushed his mother toward the car, and she came running willingly now, her eyes wide with terror. Daddy drew his gun and aimed it at the nearest target. A small black shape broke free of the hedges where Dewey had sought the soccer ball. It reminded Dewey of a spider, a charred spider with half its legs pulled off. The sound it made was a hor-

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rible, senseless wailing. It lunged at Dewey's father, and he fired without hesitation.

The black thing fell dead on the weeds. The gun sounded again and again. By now the other men were running for the cars, pushing their families inside; a few pulled out shotguns they carried mounted behind the seats. With loud whoops, they rushed out to join Dewey's father. The protestors kept on coming, and the killing began in earnest. The long grass hid the bodies as they fell.

"Come back here!" Dewey's mother screamed from the car. "Come back here right now, damn it!"

Dewey's father hesitated, glanced back at her, then lowered his arm. He ran across the field and jumped into the car. "Out of bullets anyway," he said as he started the motor. Dewey's neck snapped as the car leaped backward, screeching out of the parking space. The station wagon lurched forward in a sharp turn, and then they were speeding along the narrow road.

At a blind turn, a car shot out in front of them. Dewey's mother screamed; the brakes squealed. The cars collided with a soft metallic crunch and the shattering of glass.

After that, Dewey lay dozing in the seat, aware of the stillness of the hills, the soft sound of settling dust, the warmth of the sun. He thought it was the most beautiful moment he had ever known. Then he remembered what had happened, where he was.

He sat up and saw Daddy standing on the road talking to another man, the driver of the other car. Mommy leaned against the hood, holding her forehead. As in a dream, Dewey opened his door and walked toward them. Everything seemed to speed up; it felt as if the world were beginning, ever so slowly, to spin like a carousel. He was dizzy and sick to his stomach.

"What the hell are you doing here?" Dewey's father asked the man.

"What do you mean? I came for the picnic."

"The hell you did! You're on duty this afternoon — you're supposed to be watching the board."

"Not me," said the man angrily. "I swapped with McNally. He's watching the board. We made a deal."

"I just left McNally in the picnic grounds. He's back there taking care of some demonstrators."

"The ones at the gate?"

"That doesn't matter. What matters is that your butt is in the wrong

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damn place. You're not supposed to deal with McNally; you deal with me."

The man shook his head, staring at the broken noses of the cars. "Shit. You mean McNally's here? Then who's at the board?"

"That's what I'm asking you!"

The other man shrugged, avoiding the eyes of Dewey's father.

Just then Dewey's nausea surged. He didn't have time to ask his mother for help. He ran to the side of the road, bent over in the bushes, and began to vomit.

Everything went dark. The carousel was spinning full tilt. Dewey sprawled over in the dirt, crying wordlessly for his parents. Thorns tore at his face; the sun scorched his arms, and his lungs filled with dust that tasted like smoke and ashes. He thought he was going to faint; he saw his father's hand reaching to pull him to his feet. He grabbed hold of Daddy's wrist for the merest second, then lost it. The world got even darker.

Dewey's dream seemed to last an eternity. He saw bits and pieces of his whole life, strewn together and flying about in a feverish whirlwind. For a time he lay comfortably on the backseat of the station wagon, wrapped up in a blanket and listening to his parents talk while streetlights flickered

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past. Then he was at his grandparents' house, playing with their old dog, the one with cataracts who peed every time the doorbell rang. He was climbing the tree behind his house, eating fresh corn, smelling the dusty electric smell of rain and thunder that came with a storm.

And then he woke up, still burning with fever. He must have wandered off the road farther than he thought, deeper into the bushes. He could hear voices, someone shouting. He crawled toward the sound, wanting only to be safe with his parents, away from the animal people, the zombies, the gunshots, the bodies, away from the accident and the thorns. He got to his feet in the bushes, and suddenly he was out in the open; he was free.

He tried to suck in a deep breath, but it hurt his lungs. He blinked away harsh tears and sunlight. Then he saw Daddy.

Dewey wailed with relief and started running. "Daddy!" he cried, though his throat was still sore and the words didn't seem right.

In fact, nothing seemed right. He had come call the way back to the picnic grounds. There were the tables; there were the cars; there was Mommy running away.

And here was Daddy, aiming his gun. Aiming it right at Dewey and squeezing the trigger.

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Elixabeth Moon's ("If Nudity Offends You," Feb. 1988) element is irony, as "New World Symphony" aptly demonstrates. It is the story of an artist who must create upon demand. Those for whom he creates discover that music does, indeed, "hath charms to sooth" and much more. . .

NEW WORLD SYMPHONY

By Elizabeth Moon

IT WAS HIS FIRST WORLD. On the way out, resting in the half-doze of transfer, he imagined many things. A fire world, all volcanic and rough, showers of sparks against a night sky, clouds of steam and ash, firelit. Or a water world like Pella, with all the endless quivering shades of color, the blues and silvers, purples and strange greens. It might have mountains like Lelare, a purple sky, six moons or none, rings like golden Saturn's, rainbowed arcs. . . . He saw against the screen of his mind these and other worlds, some seen once in pictures, others created from his mind's store of images.

All he knew for certain was that no one yet had set foot on it. Only two probes had been there: the robot survey, which noted it as a possible, and the manned scout, which had given it a 6.7, a marginal rating, out of 10. He didn't know why the rating was 6.7; he knew he might not have understood it even if they'd told him. It had been approved, and then assigned, and he —just out of the Academy, just past his thesis — had been given that assignment.

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He half-heard something in his chamber, felt a pressure on his arm, hands touching his face. He struggled to open his eyes, and heard the quiet voice he had heard so far ago.

"Please, sir, wait a moment. It's all right; you're rousing now. Take a deep breath first . . . good. Another. Move your right hand, please. . . ."

He felt his fingers shift, stiffly at first, then more easily. More than anything else, the reported stiffening had frightened him: his hands were his life. But they'd explained, insisted that it was no more than missing a single week of practice, not the three years of the voyage. He moved his left hand, then tried again with his eyelids. This time they opened, and he had no trouble focusing on the medical attendant. Gray hair, brown eyes, the same quiet face that had put him in his couch back at the Station.

He wanted to ask if they had arrived, and felt childish in that desire. The attendant smiled, helped him to sit and swing his legs over the edge of the couch. "Your first meal, sir; it's important that you eat before standing." He pushed over a sliding table with a tray of food. "Do you recall your name, sir?"

Until he was asked, he hadn't thought of it. For a moment the concept of his name eluded him. Then he remembered, clearly and completely. "Of course," he said. "Georges Mantenon. Musician-graduate."

"Yes, sir" The attendant fastened a strap around his left arm while he ate with his right. "I must check this; just a moment."

Mantenon paid no attention to the attendant; he knew the man wouldn't answer medical questions, and even if he did, it would tell him nothing. He had an appetite; the Class Three food tasted the same as always. His hands felt better every moment. He held his left arm still until the medical attendant was through with it, and went on eating.

When he'd finished, the other man showed him to a suite of rooms: bath, workroom, sitting room. Along one wall of the workroom was the keyboard/pedal complex of a Meirinhoff, the same model he'd used for his thesis. He made himself shower and change before climbing into it. He adjusted the seat, the angle of the keyboard and pedal banks, the length of cord from the headpiece to output generator. Then he touched the keys, lightly, and felt/heard/saw the Meirinhoff awake.

His fingers danced along the keyboard, touching section controls as well as pitch/resonance indicators. Woodwinds, brass — he felt festive, suddenly aware that he'd been afraid, even during the transfer dreams. He

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toed a percussion pedal, tipped it off. Wrong blend, wrong tempo. For a long moment he struggled with the pedals, then remembered what was wrong. He'd put on exactly what the attendant laid out, which meant he had on slippers. Slippers! He scraped them off with his toes, and kicked them out of the way. His toes, surgically freed at the metatarsal, and held for walking by special pads in his shoes (not that he walked much), spread wide. Years of practice had given him amazing reach. He tried again for the percussion he wanted, toed cymbal on delay, pitched the snares down a tone, added the bright dash of the triangle. He played with balance, shifting fingers and toes minutely until the sound in the phones matched that in his head. Then he paused, hands and feet still.

His head dipped, so that the subvoc microphone touched the angle of his larynx. His hands lifted briefly; his toes curled up. Then he reached out, curling his tongue up in his mouth to let the clean sound come free, and put the Meirinhoff on full audio/record. He could feel, through his fingers, his feet, his seat, the wave of sound, the wave he designed, drove, controlled, shaped, and finally, after two glorious minutes of play, subdued. He lay back in his seat, fully relaxed, and tapped the system off audio.

"Sir?" The voice brought him upright, the short cord of the headset dragging at his ears.

"*Klarge!*" It was the worst oath he knew, and he meant it. No one, *no one*, not even a full professor, would walk in on someone who had just composed. And for someone who had had no outlet for years—! He pulled off the headset and glared at the person standing in the doorway. Not the medical attendant; the blue uniform meant ship's crew, and the decorative braid all over the front probably meant some rank. He forced a smile to his face. "Sorry," he said, achieving an icy tone. "It is not usual to interrupt a composition."

"I didn't," the person pointed out. He realized she was a woman. "You had finished, I believe; I did not speak until you had turned off the audio."

Mantenon frowned. "Nonetheless—"

"The captain wishes to speak with you," said the woman. "About projecting all that without warning."

"Projecting—?" He was confused. "All I did was compose — that's my job."

"You had that thing on external audio," she said, "and you nearly blast-

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ed our ears out with it. You're not supposed to be hooked up to the ship's speakers without permission."

"Was I?" He remembered, now that he came to think of it, something the attendant had said about the bank of switches near the console. He had been so glad to see the Meirinhoff, he hadn't paid much attention. He gave a quick glance at the recording timer: two minutes, fifteen seconds —quite a long time, actually, if they didn't know it was coming or how to interrupt it.

"You were." Her mouth quirked; he realized she was trying not to laugh at him. "Your suite has an override for anything but emergency; that's so we could hear if anything was wrong." She nodded at the Meirinhoff. "That was more than we bargained on."

"I'm sorry. I — it had just been so long, and I didn't know the hookup was on. . . ." He hadn't felt so stupid since his second year in the conservatory. He knew his ears were red; he could feel them burning.

"All right. I understand it wasn't intentional. I'd thought maybe you were going to insist that we listen to every note you played—"

"*Klarge*, no! Of course not. But the captain—?"

She grinned at him. "I'm the captain, Mr. Mantenon. Captain Plessan. You probably don't recall meeting me before; you were sedated when they brought you aboard."

"Oh." He couldn't think of anything to say, polite or otherwise. "I'm sorry about the speakers—"

"Just remember the switch, please. And when you've recovered fully, I'd be glad to see you in the crew lounge."

"I'm — I'm fine now, really—" He started clambering free of the Meirinhoff, flipping controls off, resetting the recorders, fumbling for his slippers. He'd like to have stayed, listened to his composition, refined it, but everything he'd been told about shipboard etiquette urged him to go at once. He'd already insulted the captain enough as it was.

He had hoped the lounge viewscreens would be on, but blue drapes with the Exploration Service insignia covered them. The captain waved her hand at them. "You were probably hoping to see your world, Mr. Mantenon, but regulations forbid me to allow you a view until your initial briefing is complete. You must then sign your acceptance of the contract, and acknowledge all the warnings. Only then can I allow you to see the world."

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"And how long will that be?"

"Not long. Only a few hours, I expect." A chime rang out, mellow, with overtones he recognized at once. Several others came into the lounge, and the captain introduced them. Senior crew: officers, the Security team, medical, heads of departments. These would see to his needs, as well as the ship's needs, in the coming months. He tried to pay attention to them, and then to the final briefing the captain gave, but all he could think of was the new world, the unknown world, that hung in space outside the ship. He signed the papers quickly, glancing through them only enough to be sure that the Musician's Union had put its authorization on each page. What would that world be like? Would he be able to express its unique beauty in music, as his contract specified, or would he fail?

At last the formalities were over. The other crew members left, and the captain touched the controls that eased the curtains back over the viewscreens and switched video to the lounge.

His first thought was simply *NO*. No, I don't like this world. No, I can't do this world. No, someone's made a mistake, and it's impossible, and it wouldn't take a musician to express this world in sound. A large crunching noise would do the job. His trained mind showed him the score for the crunching noise, for both Meirinhoff and live orchestra, and elaborated a bit. He ignored it and stared at the captain. "That?" he asked.

"That," she said. "It's going to be a mining world."

That was obvious. Whatever it was good for, anything that disgusting shade of orange streaked with fungus blue wasn't a pleasure world, or an agricultural world. That left mining. He forced himself to look at the screen again. Orange, shading from almost sulfur yellow to an unhealthy orange-brown. The blue couldn't be water, not that shade . . . he thought of bread mold again. Something vaguely greenish blue, and a sort of purplish patch toward the bottom . . . if that was the bottom.

"Does it have any moons or anything?" he asked.

"All that information is in the cube I gave you, but yes, it has three of them. Let me change the mags, here, and you'll see. . . ." She punched a few buttons, and the planet seemed to recede. Now he saw two moons, one small and pale yellow, the other one glistening white. "I'll leave you now," she said. "Please don't use the ship speakers for your composition without letting me know, and if you need anything, just ask." And without another word, she turned and left him.

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Monster, he thought, and wasn't sure if he meant the planet or the captain. Ugly bastard — that was the planet. Someone must have made a mistake. He'd been told — he'd been *assured* — that psych service had made assignments based on his personality profile and the planet's characteristics. The planet was supposed to represent something central to his creativity, and draw on the main vectors of his genius. Or something like that; he couldn't quite remember the exact words. But if he hated it from the beginning, something was wrong. He'd expected to have to court a reaction, the way he'd had to do with so many projects: the Karnery vase, the square of blue wool carpet, the single fan-shaped shell. Each of those had become an acceptable composition only after days of living with each object, experiencing it and its space, and the delicate shifts his mind made in response.

But he saw nothing delicate in that planet. And nothing delicate in his response. It hung gross and ugly in the sky, an abomination, like a rotting gourd; he imagined he could smell it. He could not — he *would* not —commit that atrocity to music.

In spite of himself, a melodic line crawled across his brain, trailing harmonies and notations for woodwinds. He felt his fingers flex, felt himself yearning for the Meirinhoff. No. It was ridiculous. Anything he might compose in this disgust would be itself disgusting. His study was beauty; his business was beauty. He glanced at the viewscreen again. The white moon had waned to a nail paring; the yellow one was hardly more than half-full. He wondered how fast they moved, how fast the ship moved. How could they be in orbit around the planet, and yet outside its moons' orbits? He wished he'd paid more attention to his briefings on astroscience. He remembered the cube in his hand, and sighed. Maybe that would tell him more, would explain how this world could possibly be considered a match for him.

But after the cube, he was just as confused. It gave information: diameter, mass, characteristics of the star the planet circled, characteristics of atmosphere (unbreathable), native life-forms (none noted by surveys), chemical analysis, and so on and so on. Nothing else; nothing that gave him any idea why the psychs would pick that planet for him.

Restless, he moved over to the Meirinhoff. He couldn't tell the captain no, not after signing the contract. He had to compose something. He checked to make sure he was not hooked into the speaker system, and

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climbed back into his instrument. At least he could refine that *crunch* of dismay. . . . It might make an accent in something else, sometime.

WITH HIS eyes closed, he stroked the keys, the buttons, the pedals, bringing first one section then another into prominence, extrapolating from what he heard in the earphones to the whole sound, once freed. The crunch, once he had it to his satisfaction, became the sound a large gourd makes landing on stone. . . . He remembered that from his boyhood. And after, the liquid splatter, the sound of seeds striking. . . . In his mind a seed flew up, hung, whirling in the air like a tiny satellite, a pale yellow moon, waxing and waning as his mind held the image. He noted that on subvoc, recorded that section again.

The melody that had first come to him, the one he'd suppressed, came again, demanding this time its accompaniment of woodwinds. He called up bassoon, then the Sulesean variant, even deeper of pitch, and hardly playable by a human, Above it the oboe and teroe. He needed another, split the oboe part quickly, and transposed pedals to woodwinds, his toes and fingers racing while the thought lasted. He wasn't sure it had anything to do with the planet, but he liked it. He paused then, and called the recordings back into the earphones.

The crunch: massive, final, definitive. A long pause . . . he counted measures this time, amazed at the length of it before the splattering sounds, the flute and cello that defined the seed/satellite. He stopped the playback and thought a moment, lips pursed. It was a conceit, that seed, and maybe too easy . . . but for now, he'd leave it in. He sent the replay on. The melody was all right — in fact, it was good — but it had no relation to the preceding music. He'd have to move it somewhere, but he'd save it. He marked the section for relabeling, and lay back, breathing a little heavily and wondering what time it was.

The clock, when he noticed it on the opposite wall, revealed that he'd spent over three hours in the Meirinhoff. No wonder he was tired and hungry. He felt a little smug about it, how hard he'd worked on his first day out of transfer, as he levered himself out of the instrument and headed for the shower.

In the next days he found himself working just as hard. An hour or so in the lounge alone, watching the planet in the viewscreen, changing

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magnification from time to time. Disgust waned to distaste, and then to indifference. It was not responsible, after all, for how it looked to him. The planet could not know his struggles to appreciate it, to turn its mineral wealth, its ugly lifeless surface, into a work of art.

And when he could look at it no longer, when he found himself picking up what little reading material the ship's crew left lying about, he returned to his instrument, to the Meirinhoff, and fastened himself into that embrace of mingled struggle and pleasure. His mind wandered to the Academy, to the lectures on aesthetic theory, on music law, all those things he'd found so dull at the time. He called up and reread the section in General Statutes about colonization and exploitation of new worlds, until he could recite it word for word and the rhythm worked itself into his composition.

"It is essential that each new world be incorporated into the species's ethic and emotional milieu. . . ." Actually it didn't make much sense. If it hadn't been for whoever wrote that, though, most musicians wouldn't have a job. The decision to send musicians and artists to each newly discovered, rated world, before anyone actually landed on it, and to include artists and musicians on each exploration landing team had provided thousands of places for those with talent. Out of that effort had come some superb music and art — Keller's "Morning on Moondog" and the ballet *Gia's Web* by Annette Polacek — and plenty of popular stuff. Miners, colonists, explorers — they all seemed to want music and art created for "their" world, whatever it was. Mantenon had heard the facile and shallow waltzes Tully Conover had written for an obscure cluster of mining worlds: everyone knew "Mineral Waltz," "Left by Lead," and the others. And in art the thousands of undistinguished visuals of space views: ringed planets hanging over moons of every color and shape, twinned planets circling one another . . . but it sold, and supported the system, and that was what counted.

Georges Mantenon had hoped — had believed — he could do better. If nothing as great as *Gia's Web*, he could compose at least as well as Metzger, whose *Symphony Purple* was presented in the Academy as an example of what they were to do. Mantenon had been honored with a recording slot for two of his student compositions. One of them had even been optioned by an off-planet recording company. The Academy would get the royalties, if any, of course. Students weren't allowed to earn money

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from their music. Still, he had been aware that his teachers considered him especially gifted. But with a miserable, disgusting orange ball streaked with blue fungus — how could he do anything particularly worthy? The square of blue carpet had been easy compared to this.

He tried one arrangement after another of the melody and variations he'd already composed, shifting parts from one instrument to another, changing keys, moving the melody itself from an entrance to a climax to a conclusion. Nothing worked. Outside, in the screens, he saw the same ugly world; if his early disgust softened into indifference, it never warmed into anything better. He could not, however calmly he looked, see anything beautiful about it. The moons were better — slightly — and the third, when it finally appeared around the planet's limb, was a striking lavender. He liked that, found his mind responding with a graceful flourish of strings. But it was not enough. It fit nowhere with the rest of the composition — if it could be called a composition — and by itself it could not support his contract.

He had hardly noticed, in those early days, that he rarely saw any of the crew, and when he did, they never asked about his work. He would have been shocked if they had asked: he was, after all, a licensed creative artist, whose work was carried out in as much isolation as Security granted any of the Union's citizens. Yet when he came into the crew lounge, after struggling several hours with his arrangement for the lavender moon, and found it empty as usual, he was restless and dissatisfied. He couldn't, he thought grumpily, do it *all* himself. He lay back on the long couch under the viewport and waited. Someone would have to come in eventually, and he'd insist, this time, that they talk to him.

The first to appear was a stocky woman in a plain uniform — no braid at all. She nodded at him, and went to the dispenser for a mug of something that steamed. Then she sat down, facing slightly away from him, inserted a plug in her ear, and thumbed the control of a cubescreen before he could get his mouth shaped to speak to her. He sat there, staring, aware that his mouth was still slightly open, and fumed. She could at least have said hello. He turned away politely, shutting his mouth again, and folded his arms. Next time he'd be quicker.

But the next person to come in ignored him completely, walked straight to the other woman, and leaned over her, whispering something he could not hear. It was a man Mantenon had never seen before, with

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a single strip of blue braid on his collar. The woman turned, flipped off the cubescreen, and removed her earplug. The man sat beside her, and they talked in low voices; Mantenon could hear the hum, but none of the words. After a few minutes, the two of them left, with a casual glance at Mantenon that made him feel like a crumpled food tray someone had left on the floor. He could feel the pulse beating in his throat, anger's metronome, and a quick snarl of brass and percussion rang in his head. It wasn't bad, actually. . . . He let himself work up the scoring for it.

When he opened his eyes again, one of the med techs stood beside him, looking worried.

"Are you all right, sir?"

"Of course," said Mantenon, a bit sharper than he meant. "I was just thinking of something." He sat up straighter. "I'm fine."

"Have you been overworking?"

He opened his mouth to say no, and then stopped. Maybe he had been.

"Are you feeling paranoid, sir?" asked the med tech.

"Paranoid?"

"Does it seem that everyone is watching you, or talking about you, or refusing to help you?"

"Well. . . ." If his bad mood was a medical problem, maybe they would give him a pill or shot, and he'd be able to compose something better. He nodded, finally, and as he hoped, the med tech handed him a foil packet.

"Take this, sir, with a cup of something hot — and you really ought to eat your meals with the crew for a day or so."

Med could override his artist's privileges, he remembered suddenly — if they thought he was sick, or going crazy, they would tell Security, and he'd be put on full monitor, like everyone else.

He made himself smile. "You may be right," he said. "I guess I started working, and just forgot about meals and things."

The med tech was smiling now, and even brought him a hot drink from the dispenser. "Here. You'll feel better soon. Shall I tell the captain you'll be eating with the crew today?"

He nodded, gulping down the green pill in the packet with a bitter cup of Estrain tea.

He showered and changed for the next meal, unsure which it would be, and walked into the crew mess to find himself confronted with piles of

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sweet ration squares and fruit mush. He forced himself to smile again. He had hoped for midmeal or latemeal, when the ration squares were flavored like stew of various kinds. Sweets made his head ache. But the med tech, halfway around the ring, waved to him, and Mantenon edged past others to his side.

"The yellow ones aren't sweet," the med tech said. He handed over a yellow square and a bowl of mush. "You'll like it better than the brown ones."

Mantenon found the yellow similar to the ones he had had delivered to his suite: those were orange, but the taste was the same, or nearly so. He ate two yellow squares while listening to the others talk. None of it made sense to him. It was all gossip about crew members — who was sleeping with whom, or having trouble with a supervisor — or tech talk, full of numbers and strange words. Finally someone across the ring spoke to him, in a tone that seemed to carry humor.

"Well, Mr. Mantenon — how's your music coming?"

He choked on his bite of ration, swallowed carefully, and folded his hands politely to answer.

"It's . . . well, it's coming. It's still unsettled."

"Unsettled?" The questioner, Mantenon now realized, was the same stocky woman he'd seen earlier in the lounge.

"Yes, it—" His hands began to wave as he talked, mimicking their movements on the Meirinhoff. "It's got some good themes, now, but the overall structure isn't settled yet."

"Don't you plan the structure first?" asked someone else, a tall person with two green braids on his collar. "I would think rational planning would be necessary. . . ."

Mantenon smiled. "Sir, your pardon, but it is not the way creative artists work. We are taught to respond to a stimulus freely, with no preconceptions of what form might be best. When we have all the responses, then we shape those into whatever structure the music itself will bear."

"But how do you know. . . ?"

"That's what our training is for." He dipped a bite of fruit mush, swallowed it, and went on. "Once we have the responses, then our training shows us what structure is best for it."

The tall man frowned. "I would have thought the stimulus would determine the correct structure. . . . Surely anything as large as a planet

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would call for a serious, major work—"

"Oh no, Kiry!" That was a young woman who hadn't spoken before. "Don't you remember *Asa's Dream*? It's just that short, poignant dance, and yet the planet was that big pair of gas giants over in Harker's Domain. I've seen a cube of them: it's perfect."

"Or the truly *sinister* first movement of Manoken's Fifth Symphony," said Mantenon, regaining control of his audience. "That was not even a planet. . . . He wrote that it was inspired by the reflections of light on the inside of his sleepcase." They all chuckled, some more brightly than others, and Mantenon finished his breakfast. The med tech seemed to be watching him, but he expected that.

That day he incorporated the bits he'd scored in the crew lounge — "the anger movement," he thought of it — into his main piece. It was the planet's response to the insult of his initial *crunch*; for a moment he wondered about himself, imputing emotions to planets, but decided that it was normal for an artist. He wouldn't tell Med about it. And at latemeal, several crew chose to sit near him, including him casually in their chatter with questions about well-known pieces of music and performers. He felt much better.

Still, when he decided, several days later, that his composition was complete and adequate, he had his doubts. The planet was ugly. Had he really made something beautiful out of it — and if he had, was he rendering (as he was sworn to do) its essential nature? Would someone else, seeing that planet after hearing his music, feel that it fit? Or would that future hearer laugh?

That doubt kept him doodling at the console another few days, making minute changes in the scoring, and then changing them back. He spent one whole working shift rooting through the music references he'd brought along, checking his work as if he were analyzing someone else's. But that told him only what he already knew: it had a somewhat unconventional structure (but not wildly so), it was playable by any standard orchestra (as defined by the Musician's Union), it could be adapted for student or limited orchestra (for which he would earn a bonus), and none of the instruments were required to play near their limits. It would classify as moderately difficult to play, and difficult to conduct, and it contained all the recommended sections for a qualification work (another bonus): changes in tempo, changes from simple to complex harmonics, direct and indirect key changes.

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He played it back, into the headphones, with full orchestration, and shook his head. It was what it was, and either it would do, or it wouldn't. And this time he could not depend on a panel of professors to check his work and screen out anything unworthy. This time, if he judged it wrongly, the whole CUG system would know. He frowned, but finally reached for one of the unused memory cubes and slid it into place. And punched the controls for "Final Record: Seal/No Recall." It was done.

With the cube in hand, and the backup cubes in his personal lockbin, he made his way to the lounge area once more. The curtains were drawn; the captain sat on one of the couches. He opened his mouth, and realized that she already knew he'd finished. Security must keep a closer watch on musicians than he'd thought. He wondered if they'd listened to his music as well.... He'd been told that no one did, without permission of the artist, but Security was everywhere.

The captain smiled. "Well — and so you're finished, Mr. Mantenon. And we've not heard it yet. . . ."

"Do — do you want to?" He felt himself blushing again, and hated it. Yet he wanted her to hear the music, wanted her to be swept away by it, to see and feel what he had seen and felt about that planet.

"It would be an honor," she said. He watched the flicker of her eyelid. Was it amusement? Weariness? Or genuine interest? He couldn't tell. He wavered, but finally his eagerness overcame him, and he handed her the cube.

"Here," he said. "It runs about twenty-nine, Standard."

"So much work for this," she said, with no irony, holding the cube carefully above the slot. "Twenty-nine minutes of music from — how many weeks of work?"

He couldn't remember, and didn't care. Now that she held it, he wanted her to go on and play the thing. He had to see her reaction, good or bad, had to know whether he'd truly finished. "Go on," he said, and then remembered that she was the captain. "If you want to." She smiled again.

Played on the lounge sound system, it was different, changed by the room's acoustics and the less agile speakers that were not meant to have the precision of the Meirinhoff's wave generators. Even so, and even with the volume held down, Mantenon thought it was good. And so, evidently, did the captain; he had been taught to notice the reactions of the audience

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to both live and replayed performances. Smiles could be faked, but not the minute changes in posture, in breathing, even pulse rate, that powerful music evoked. In the final version, his original reaction framed the whole composition, the *crunch* split, literally, in mid-dissonance, and the interstice filled with the reaction, counterreaction, interplay of themes and melodies. Then the crunch again, cutting off all discussion, and the final splatter of seeds — the moons. As the cube ended, Mantenon waited tensely for the captain's reaction.

It came, along with a clatter of applause from the speakers — she had switched the lounge sound system to transmission, and the crew evidently liked it as well as she did. Mantenon felt his ears burning again, this time with pleasure. They were used to hauling musicians; they must have heard many new pieces . . . and he . . . he had pleased them.

The captain handed his cube back to him. "Remarkable, Mr. Mantenon. It always amazes me, the responses you artists and musicians give. . . ."

"Thank you. Is it possible — excuse me, Captain, but I don't know the procedure — is it possible to transmit this for registry?"

Her expression changed: wariness, tension, something else he couldn't read, swiftly overlaid by a soothing smile. "Mr. Mantenon, it *is* registered. You mean you weren't aware that immediate . . . transmission . . . for registry was part of the Musician's Union contract with this vessel?"

"No. I thought . . . well, I didn't really think about it." He was still puzzled. He remembered — he was sure he remembered — that the licensed musician had to personally initiate transmission and registration of a composition. But Music Law had always been his least favorite subject. Maybe it was different the first time out.

"You should have read your contract more carefully." She leaned back in her seat, considering him. "Whenever you're employed to do the initial creative survey, you're on CUG Naval vessels, right?"

"Well . . . yes."

"It's different for landing parties, though not much. But here, all communication with the outside must be controlled by CUG Security, in order to certify your location, among other things. In compensation for this, we offer immediate registration, datemarked local time. You *did* know there was a bonus for completion within a certain time?"

"Yes, I did. But — does this mean we aren't going back soon?"

"Not to Central Five, no. Not until the survey's complete."

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"Survey?" Mantenon stared at her, stunned.

"Yes — you really didn't read your contract, did you?"

"Well, I—"

"Mr. Mantenon, this was just the *first* of your assignments. Surely you don't think CUG would send a ship to each separate planet just for artistic cataloging, do you? There are seven more planets in this system, and twelve in the next, before we start back."

"I . . . don't believe it!" He would have shouted, but shock had taken all his breath. Nineteen *more* planets? When the first one had taken . . . he tried to think, and still wasn't sure . . . however many weeks it had been. The captain's smile was thinner. She held out a fac of his contract.

"Look again, Mr. Mantenon." He took it, and sat, hardly realizing that the captain had settled again in her seat to watch him.

The first paragraph was familiar: his name, his array of numbers for citizenship, licensure, Union membership, the name of the ship (CSN *Congarsin*, he noted), references to standard calendars and standard clocks. The second paragraph. . . . He slowed, reading it word for word. ". . . to compose such work as suitably expresses, to the artist, the essential truth of the said celestial body in such manner. . . ," was a standard phrase. There was specification of bonuses for instrumentation, vocal range, difficulty, and time . . . but where Mantenon expected to find ". . . on completion of this single work . . . ," he read instead, with growing alarm, ". . . on completion of the works enumerated in the appendix, the musician shall be transported to his point of origin or to some registered port equidistant from the ship's then location as shall be acceptable to him, providing that the necessary duties of the CUG vessel involved allow. In lieu of such transportation, the musician agrees to accept. . . ." But he stopped there, and turned quickly to the appendix. There, just as the captain had said, was a complete listing of the "celestial bodies to be surveyed musically." Eight of eleven planets in the CGSx1764 system, and twelve of fifteen planets in the CGSx1766 system. It even gave an estimated elapsed time for travel and "setup," whatever that was . . . cumulative as . . . Mantenon choked.

"Twenty-four *years*!"

"With that many planets in each system, Mr. Mantenon, we'll be traveling almost all the time on in-system drive."

"But — but that means by the time we finish, I'll be—" He tried

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By the time we return to Central Five, if we do, you'll be near sixty, Mr. Mantenon . . .

to calculate it, but the captain was faster.

"By the time we return to Central Five, if we do, you'll be near sixty, Mr. Mantenon . . . and a very famous composer, if your first work is any indication of your ability."

"But I thought I'd — I planned to conduct its premiere. . . ." He had imagined himself back at the Academy, rehearsing its orchestra on their first run through his own music. If not his first contract composition, then a later one. "It's not fair!" he burst out. "It's. . . . They told us that Psych picked out first contracts, to help us, and they gave me that disgusting *mess* out there, and then this!"

"To help you, or best suited to you?" The captain's lips quirked, and he stared at her, fascinated. Before he could answer, she went on. "Best suited, I believe, is what you were told . . . just as you were told to read your contract before signing it."

"Well, but I — I assumed they'd screened them. . . ."

"And you were eager to go off-world. You requested primary music survey; that's in your file. You asked for this—"

And with a rush of despair, he remembered that he had, indeed, asked for this, in a way he hoped the captain did not know — but he feared she did. He had been too exceptional. . . . He challenged his professors, the resident composers; he had been entirely too adventurous to be comfortable. When he looked at the captain, she was smiling in a way that made her knowledge clear.

"The Union has a way of handling misfits, Mr. Mantenon, while making use of their talents. Adventure, pioneering, is held in high esteem — because, as a wise reformer on old Earth once said, it keeps the adventurers far away from home." And with a polite nod, she left him sitting there.

He knew there was nothing he could do. He was a musician, not a rebel; a musician, not a pioneer; a musician, not a fighter. Without the special shoes to counteract the surgery on his feet, he couldn't even walk down the hall. Besides, he didn't want to cause trouble: he wanted to

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compose his music, and have it played, and — he had to admit — he wanted to be known.

And this they had taken away. They would use his music for their own ends, but he would never hear it played. He would never stand before the live orchestra — that anachronism that nonetheless made the best music even more exciting — he would stand there, alight with the power that the baton gave him, and bring his music out of all those bits of wood and metal and leather and bone, all those other minds. By the time he returned — if they ever let him return — he would be long out of practice in conducting, and long past his prime of composing. He would know none of the players anymore: only the youngest would still be active, and they would be dispersed among a hundred worlds. That was the worst, perhaps — that they had exiled him from his fellow musicians.

He came to himself, after a long reverie, sitting with clenched hands in an empty room. Well. He could do nothing, musician that he was, but make music. If he refused, he would be punishing himself as much as he punished the government or the Union. So . . . Georges Mantenon rose stiffly and made his way back to his quarters. So he would compose. They thought he was too good to stay near the centers of power? They would find out how good he was. Anger trembled; cymbals lightly clashed; a sullen mutter of drums. Outrage chose a thin wedge honed by woodwinds, sharpened on strings. They would refuse power? He would create power, become power, bind with music what they had forbidden him to hold.

His mind stirred, and he felt as much as heard what music was in him. He had not imagined *that* kind of power before. Hardly thinking, he slipped into the Meirinhoff's embrace, thumbed it onto the private circuit only he could hear, and began. He had plenty of time.

When he spoke to the captain again, his voice was smooth, easy. He would not repeat, he said, his earlier mistake of isolation and overwork. . . . He requested permission to mingle with the crew, perhaps even — if it was permitted — play incomplete sequences to those interested. The captain approved, and recommended regular Psych checks, since the mission would last so long. Mantenon bowed, and acquiesced.

He began cautiously, having no experience in deceit. He asked the crew what they'd thought of Opus Four, and what they thought he should call it. He chatted with them about their favorite musicians and music.

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He told anecdotes of the musicians he'd known. And he composed.

He made a point of having something to play for them every few days . . . a fragment of melody, a variation on something they already knew. One or two played an instrument as a hobby. Gradually they warmed to him, came to ask his advice, even his help. A would-be poet wanted his verses set to music to celebrate a friend's nameday. The lio players wondered why no one had written a concerto for lio (somebody had, Mantenon told him, but the lio was simply not a good solo instrument for large spaces).

In the weeks between the first planet and the next in that system, Mantenon did nothing but this. He made acquaintances out of strangers, and tried to see who might, in the years to come, be a friend. He knew he was being watched for a reaction, knew they knew he was angry and upset, but — as he told the most clinging of his following with a shrug — what could he do? He had signed the contract, he was only a composer (he made a face at that, consciously seconding the practical person's opinion of composers), and he had no way to protest.

"I could scream at the captain, I suppose," he said. "Until she called Med to have me sedated. I could write letters to the Union — but if in fact the Union wants me out here, what good would that do?"

"But doesn't it make you *angry*?" the girl asked. He was sure it was a Security plant. He pursed his lips, then shook his head.

"I was angry, yes — and I wish I could go back, and hear my music played. It doesn't seem fair. But I can't *do* anything, and I might as well do what I'm good at. I have a good composing console — that's a full-bank Meirinhoff they gave me — and plenty of subjects and plenty of time. What else could I do?"

She probed longer, and again from time to time, but finally drifted away, back into the mass of crew, and he decided that Security was satisfied — for a time. By then they were circling the second planet he was to survey.

This one, luckily for his slow-maturing plans, was one of those rare worlds whose basic nature was obvious to everyone. Habitable, beautiful, it was the real reason that the system was being opened; the other worlds — like the marginal mining planet he had begun to call "Grand Crunch" — were merely a bonus. It had three moons, glinting white, pale yellow, and rosy. Its music had to be joyous, celebratory: Mantenon thought first of

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a waltz, with those three moons, but then changed his mind. Three *light* beats and a fourth strong, with a shift *here* to represent that huge fan of shallow sea, its shading of blue and green visible even from orbit. It wrote itself, and he knew as he wrote it that it would be immensely popular, the sort of thing that the eventual colonial office would pick up and use in advertising.

So lighthearted a work, so dashing a composition, could hardly come from someone sulking and plotting vengeance. Mantenon enjoyed the crew's delighted response, and noted the captain's satisfaction and Security's relaxation. He was being a good boy; they could quit worrying. For a while.

One solid piece of work, one definite hit — he wished he could see his credit balance. It hadn't occurred to him to ask earlier, and he was afraid that if he asked now, he'd arouse their suspicions again. But — assuming they were registering these as they were supposed to, he would end up as a *rich* old man.

The next worlds were each weeks apart. Mantenon wrote an adequate but undistinguished concerto for one of them, a quartet of woodwinds for another, a brass quintet for the crazy wobbling dance of a double world. Week after week of travel; week after week of observing, composing, revising. Even with his music, with the Meirinhoff, it was monotonous; he had been accustomed to the lively interaction of other musicians, people who understood what he was doing, and appreciated it. He had enjoyed afternoons spent lazing in the courtyards or gardens, listening to others struggling in rehearsal halls.

Without the music, he knew he would have gone mad. CUG ships used a seven-day week and four-week month; since there was no reason to worry about a planetary year (and no way to stay in phase with any particular planet), months were simply accumulated until mission's end, when the total was refigured, if desired, into local years. Mantenon felt adrift, at first, in this endless chain of days.... He missed the seasonal markers of a planet's life, the special days of recurrent cycles. Surely by now it was his birthday again. He asked one of the med techs about it during one of his checkups.... Surely they had to keep track of how old people were?

"Yes, it's simple, really. The computer figures it — ship time, background time, factores for deepsleep. Most people like to choose an interval about as long as their home planet's year, and flag it as a birthday."

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"But it's not their *real* birthday. . . . I mean, if they were back home, would it be the same day?"

"Oh no. That's too complicated. I mean, the computer could do it, but it's not really important. The point is to feel that they have their own special day coming up. Look — why don't you try it? What day of the week do you like your birthday to come on?"

"Well . . . Taan, I suppose." The best birthday he'd ever had had fallen on Taan, the year he was eight, and his acceptance to the Academy was rolled in a silver-wrapped tube at one end of the feast table.

"Taan . . . right. Look here." The tech pointed out columns of figures on the computer. "Your true elapsed age is just under thirty." Mantenon had to force himself to stay silent. Thirty already? He had lost that many years, in just these seven planets? The tech noticed nothing, and went on. "Today's Liki. . . . What about next Taan? That gives you three days to get ready. Is that enough?"

There was nothing to do to get ready. Mantenon nodded, surprised to feel a little excitement even as he knew how artificial this was. A birthday was a *birthday;* you couldn't make one by saying so. But then there were the birthdays he had already lost — that had gone unnoticed. The tech flicked several keys, and one number in one column darkened.

"Now that's marked as your shipday — your special day. The interval will be about what it was on Union Five, because that's given as your base, and next time you'll be given notice four weeks in advance. Oh — you get an automatic day off on your shipday. . . . I guess it won't mean much to you; you don't have crew duties. But you get special ration tabs — any flavor you like, if it's on board — and a captain's pass for messages. You can send a message to anyone — your family, anywhere — and for no charge."

Mantenon's shipday party enlivened the long passage between worlds, and he ended the lateshift in someone else's cabin. He had dreaded that, having to admit that he was a virgin, but, on the whole, things went well.

The last world of that system was a gas giant with all the dazzling display of jewelry such worlds could offer: moons both large and small, rings both light and dark, strange swirling patterns on its surface in brilliant color. Mantenon found himself fascinated by it, and spent hours watching out the ports, more hours watching projections of cubes about

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this satellite or that. Finally the captain came to see what was wrong.

"Nothing," he said, smiling. "It's simply too big to hurry with. Surely you realized that an artist can't always create instantly?"

"Well, but—"

"I'm starting," he assured her. "Right away." And he was, having decided that he was not about to wait the whole long sentence out. They couldn't be planning to stay in deep space for that long without resupply, with the same crew growing older along with him. They must be planning to get supplies and replacements while he was in deepsleep, while he *thought* they were using the deepspace drive. And he intended to be free of this contract at the first stop.

He had written a song for the poet: three, in fact. He had taken a folk song one of the lifesystems techs sang at his shipday party, and used it in a fugue. He listened to their tales of home, their gossip, their arguments and their jokes, saying little but absorbing what he needed to know. Gradually the crew members were responding to him, to his music; he heard snatches of this work or that being hummed or whistled, rhythmic nuances reflected in tapping fingers or the way they knocked on doors. Everything he wrote carried his deepest convictions, carried them secretly, hidden, buried in the nerve's response to rhythm, to timbre and pitch and phrase. And gradually the crew members had come to depend on his music; gradually they played their cubes of other composers less. But he knew his music could do more. And now it would.

Mantenon sat curled into the Meirinhoff's embrace, thinking, remembering. He called up his first reaction to his contract, refined it, stored it. Then he began with his childhood. Note by note, phrase by phrase, in the language of keychanges, harmonics, the voice of wood and metal and leather and bone, of strings and hollow tubes, vibrations of solids and gases and liquids, he told the story of his life. The skinny boy for whom music was more necessary than food, who had startled his father's distinguished guest by insisting that a tuning fork was wrong (it was), who had taught himself to read music by listening to Barker's *Scherzo to Saint Joan* and following the score (stolen from that same guest of his father's, the conductor Amanchi). The youth at the Academy, engulfed for the first time in a Meirinhoff, able for the first time to give his imagination a voice.

He stopped, dissatisfied. It wasn't only *his* dilemma. He had to make them understand that it was theirs. He couldn't take the ship; they had to

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give it to him; they had to want him to go where he wanted to go. Either they would have to understand his need for music, or he would have to offer something they wanted for themselves.

He let himself think of the different homeworlds he'd heard of. The famous worlds, the ones in the stories or songs. Forest worlds, dim under the sheltering leaves. Water worlds. Worlds with skies hardly speckled with stars, and worlds where the night sky was embroidered thick with colored light. And in his mind the music grew, rising in fountains, in massive buttresses, in cliffs and shadowed canyons of trembling air, shaping itself in blocks of sound that reformed the listening mind. Here it was quick, darting, active, prodding at the ears; there it lay in repose, enforcing sleep.

In the second week the captain came once to complain about the fragments he'd played in the crew lounge.

"It's unsettling," she said, herself unsettled.

He nodded toward the outside. "That's unsettling. Those fountains. . . ."

"Sulfur volcanoes," she said.

"Well, they look like fountains to me. But clearly dangerous as well as beautiful."

"No more, though, to the crew. Check with me first, or with Psych."

He nodded, hiding his amusement. He knew already that wouldn't work. And he kept on. The music grew, acquired complex interrelationships with other pieces . . . the minor concerto, the brass quintet, the simple song. Humans far from home, on a ship between worlds, with a calendar that accumulated months and gave no seasons — what did they want; what did they need? The rhythmic pattern gave it, withheld it again, offered it, tempting the listener, frustrating the ear. Yet . . . it *could* satisfy. It wanted to satisfy. Mantenon found himself working until his arms and legs cramped. To hold that power back, to hold those resolving discords in suspension, took all his strength, physical as well as mental.

He knew, by this time, that Security had a tap in his Meirinhoff. They monitored every note he brought out, every nuance of every piece. He did what he could: kept the fragments apart, except in his head, and devised a tricky control program, highly counterintuitive, to link them together when he was ready. It disgusted him to think of someone listening as he worked; it went against all he'd been taught — though he now suspected that Security had taps in the Academy as well. If they wanted to, they

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could make him look ridiculous all over CUG, by sending out the preliminary drafts under his name. But they couldn't do that. They wanted his music. So they had to monitor everything. Someone was having to listen to it, all of it; someone whose psych profile Mantenon was determined to subvert.

First he had to learn more about it. The Central Union boasted hundreds of worlds, each with its own culture . . . and in many cases, multiple cultures. The same music that would stir a Cympadian would leave a Kovashi unmoved. For mere entertainment, any of the common modes would do well enough, but Mantenon needed to go much deeper than that. He needed one theme, one particular section, that would unlock what he himself believed to be a universal desire.

It was the poet who gave him the clue he needed. At latemeal, he hurried to sit beside Mantenon, and handed over four new poems.

"For Kata," he said. "She's agreed to marry me when we—" He stopped short, giving Mantenon a startled look.

"When you get permission, Arki?" asked Mantenon. He thought to himself that the poet had meant to say, ". . . when we get back to port." He wondered which port they were near, but knew he dared not ask.

"Yes . . . that is . . . it has to clear Security, both of us being Navy."

"Mmm." Mantenon concentrated on his rations; Arki always talked if someone looked away.

"It's Crinnan, of course," Arki muttered. "He'll approve, I'm sure — I mean, he's from Kovashi Two, just as we are."

"You're from Kovashi?" asked Mantenon, affecting surprise.

"I thought I'd told you. That's why I write in seren-form: it's traditional. I suppose that's why I like your music, too . . . all those interlocked cycles."

Mantenon shrugged. "Music is universal," he said. "We're taught modes that give pleasure to most."

"I don't know. . . ." Arki stuffed in a whole ration square and nearly choked, then got it down. "Thing is, Georges, I'd like to have these set to music . . . if you have time. . . ."

"I've got to finish this composition," Mantenon said. "Maybe before I go into deepsleep for the outsystem transfer . . . how about that?" He saw the flicker in Arki's eye: so they were close to a port.

"Well. . . ," Arki said, evading his glance. "I really did want it soon. . . ."

"*Klarge.*" Mantenon said it softly, on an outbreath, which made it

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milder. "The second movement had problems anyway — maybe it'll clear if I work on your stuff briefly. But I can't promise, Arki — the contract has to come first."

"I understand," said Arki. "Thanks, and — oh, there's Kata." He bounced out of his chair to greet the woman who'd just come in.

MANTENON HUGGED the double gift to himself. Now he knew the home system of the senior Security officer aboard, and, thanks to the poet, had an excellent excuse for composing highly emotional music designed to affect someone from that system. If Arki was telling the truth: if that whole conversation was not another interlocking scheme of Security. Mantenon glowered at the Meirinhoff's main keyboard, now dull with his handling. It would be like Security, and like any Kovashi, to build an interlocking scheme. But — he thought of a power hidden in his composition — it was also a Kovashi saying that a knifeblade unties all knots.

As if Arki's poems were a literal key for a literal lock, he studied them word by word, feeling how each phrase shaped itself to fit into a socket of the reading mind. And note by note, phrase by phrase, he constructed what he hoped would be the corresponding key of music, something that fit the words so well it could not have been meant for anything else, but which acted independently, unlocking another lock, opening a deeper hidden place in the listener's will. Briefly, he thought of himself as a lover of sorts: like Arki's penetration of Kata, opening secret passages and discovering (as the Kovashi still called it) the hidden treasures of love, his penetration of Crinnan's mind searched secret byways and sought a hidden treasure . . . of freedom. The songs — asked for by crew, and therefore surely less suspect — could be played openly, without Psych review, and he hoped by then to stun Crinnan and the captain into musical lethargy long enough to play the whole song of power that would free him.

It was hard — very hard — to stay steady and calm, with that hope flooding his veins. Against it he held up the grim uncertainty of success, the likely consequence of failure. He could be killed, imprisoned, taken to a mining planet and forced into slavery. He might live long and never hear music again, save in his own ears . . . and they might twist his mind, he thought bleakly, and ruin even that. Surely others had tried what he was trying. In all the years the artists and musicians had gone out, surely some

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of them had tried to use their art to free themselves. If Crinnan were chuckling to himself now, listening to his work through a tap, he was doomed.

But he wanted out. He had to keep going. And shortly after that he had finished the work. The knife, a mere three minutes of Arki's lyrics set to music, lay at hand: the heavy weaponry was loaded, ready to play on his signal. Mantenon called Arki on the intercom.

"Want to hear it?" he asked.

"It's ready? That's good, Georges; we don't have much — I mean, I've got a few minutes before the end of the shift. Can you send it along?"

"Certainly." His finger trembled over the button. He could *see* the music, poised like a literal knife, heavy with his intent. He pushed the button, unpositioned his hand over the next control, the one that would send the main composition over the main speakers. And thumbed with his other hand the intercom to Security. Crinnan would be listening — had to be listening — and if asked *while* he was listening. . . .

Crinnan's voice was abstracted, distant. Mantenon reported that the planetary composition was finished at last. He requested permission to play it, as he had all the others, on the main speakers. Crinnan hesitated. Mantenon visualized the speaker tag in his other ear, could see the flutter of his eyelid as the song slipped through the accumulated tangle of CUG regulations and Security plots, straight for hidden center of his life, the rhythm woven in it by his homeworld and its peoples. "I suppose. . . ," he said, a little uncertainly. "You've always done that, haven't you?"

Mantenon answered respectfully, soberly. Now the song would be at *this* phrase; Crinnan should be nearly immobile. He heard in his ear a long indrawn breath, taken just as he'd designed. For a moment the sense of power overwhelmed him, then he heard Crinnan grant his request. More: "Go on — I'd like to hear it," said Crinnan.

The interval between song and main composition was crucial. Those who heard both must feel the pause as an accent, precisely timed for the composition on either side of the interval. Those who were not in the circuit for the song must have no warning. But for someone whose fingers and toes controlled whole orchestras, this was nothing: Mantenon switched his output to full ship, and pressed the sequence for the linking program.

Even though he'd written it — even though he knew it intimately, as

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a man might know a wife of thirty years, sick, healthy, dirty, clean, sweet, sour, fat, or lean — even so, its power moved him. For twenty bars, thirty, he lay passive in the Meirinhoff, head motionless, toes and fingers twitching slightly, as the music built, with astonishing quickness, a vision of delight. Then he forced himself up. He, alone, should be proof against this: he could give it a formula, dissociate from its emotional power. And he had things to do.

Their farewells were touching, but Mantenon could hardly wait to be free of them. His new world seemed huge and small at once: a slightly darker sky than Central Five's, a cooler world of stormy oceans and great forested islands. A single continent fringed with forest, its inner uplands crowned with glacial ice, and a broad band of scrubby low growth — for which he had no name, never having seen or studied such things — between. He had seen it on approach, for an hour or so, and then been landed in a windowless shuttle. At the port, green-eyed dark men and women in dark, lumpy garments had scurried about, complaining to the shuttle's crew in a sharp, angular language as they hauled the Meirinhoff across the blocky shelter of the single port building. He himself shivered in the chill wind, sniffing eagerly the scent of his new prison: strange smells that brought back no memories, mixed with the familiar reek of overheated plastics, fuel, and ship's clothing. He wondered — not for the first time — if he'd done right. But at least he would have the Meirinhoff. Or the planet would. He didn't yet know what his status would be, after all the turmoil on the ship. He'd had no chance to play the cube the captain had given him.

"Ser Mantenon?" It was a narrow-faced, dour man whose CUG insignia had tarnished to a dull gray. His accent was atrocious; Mantenon could just follow his words. "It is our pleasure to welcome such an artist as yourself to the colony. If you will follow. . . ."

He followed, down a passage whose walls were faced with rounded dark cobbles. Around a turn, left at a junction, and the walls were hung with brilliant tapestries, all roses, pinks, reds, glowing greens. Into a room where a cluster of people, all in dull colors, waited around a polished table. He was offered a chair: richly upholstered, comfortable. His escort found a chair at the head of the table.

"So you are a rebel, Ser Mantenon?" the man asked.

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Mantenon pondered his reply. "I am a musician," he said. "I want to make music."

"You suborned an official vessel of the CUG Navy," the man said. "This is not the act of a musician."

"How he did so. . . ," interrupted a woman near Mantenon. He looked at her. Her eyes were the same green as the others, her dark hair streaked with silver.

"How he did so is not the issue, Sera. *Why* he did so matters to me. What he will do in the years ahead matters to me. Will he bring trouble on us?"

"No," said Mantenon firmly. "I will not. I am not a rebel that way — stirring up trouble. I want only to make music: write music, play music, conduct —"

"Your music makes trouble." That was a balding man halfway around the table. "Your music made them bring you. . . . It might make us go. If you have that power, you must have plans to use it."

"To give pleasure," said Mantenon. Suddenly the room felt stuffy. He'd been so sure anyone living on a planet would understand why he *had* to get off that ship. "I don't want to control people with it. I did it only because it was the only way."

"Hmmm." Eyes shifted sideways, meeting each other, avoiding his gaze.

"Pleasure," said the woman who'd spoken. "That's a good thought, Ser Mantenon. Do you like this world?"

"I hardly know it yet, but it seems . . . well, it's better than the ship."

She chuckled. "I see. And you want to give *us* pleasure — the . . . the colonists?"

"Yes. I want to make music you will enjoy."

"And not send us to war with Central Union?"

"Oh no." This time, after his answer, he felt an odd combined response: relaxation and amusement both rippled around the table.

"And you are willing to work?"

"At music, certainly. I can teach a number of instruments, music theory, conduct, if there's an orchestral group with no conductor, as well as compose. But I have had surgical modifactions that make some kinds of work impossible."

"Of course. Well." She looked sideways; heads nodded frantically. "Well, then, we are pleased to welcome you. We think you will find a place,

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though it will not be what you're used to."

And from there he was led to a ground vehicle of some kind (he noticed that the shuttle had already been canted into its takeoff position), and was driven along a broad, hard-surfaced road toward a block of forest. Within the forest were clearings and buildings. Before he had time to wonder what they all were, he found himself installed in a small apartment, with clean bedding stacked on the end of a metal bunk, and the blank ends of electrical connections hanging out of the walls. His original escort yelled something down the passage, and two men appeared with utility connections: cube player, speakers, intercom.

"We have not installed your machine . . . your composing machine . . . because we do not yet know if you will stay here, or prefer to live somewhere else."

"That's fine," said Mantenon absently, watching the men work.

"The group kitchen is on the ground floor, two down," the man said. "If you think you will wish to cook here, we can install—"

"Oh no," said Mantenon. "I don't know how to cook." The man's eyebrows rose, but Mantenon didn't ask why. He was suddenly very tired, and longed for sleep. The workers left without a word, and the escort twitched his mouth into a smile.

"You are tired, I'm sure," he said. "I will leave you to rest, but I will come by before the next meal, if that is all right."

"Thank you." Mantenon didn't know whether to wave or not; the man suddenly stepped forward and grasped his hand, then bowed. Then he turned away and went out the door, shutting it behind him.

Mantenon spread a blanket over the bunk and lay down. Something jabbed him in the ribs, something angular. The captain's message cube. He sighed, grunted, and finally rolled off the bunk to stick the cube in the player.

It was a holvid cube, and the captain's miniature image appeared between his hands. He stepped back, slouched on the bunk.

"Mr. Mantenon," she began, then paused. Her hair was backlit by the worklight on her desk, her face the same cool, detached face he'd known for these years of travel. "You are an intelligent man, and so I think you will appreciate an explanation. Part of one. You resented being tricked, as all young artists do. You were smart enough to avoid violence, and obvious rebellion. I suspect you even knew we had experienced attempts to

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use art against us before. And I know you suspected that I knew what you were doing. If you are as smart as I think you are, you're wondering now if you're in prison or free, if you've won what you thought you were winning. And the answer is yes, and the answer is no.

"You are not the first to try what you tried. You are not the first to succeed. Most do not. Most are not good enough. Your music, Mr. Mantenon, is worth saving . . . at the cost of risking your effect on this colony. Although you will never be allowed to leave that planet, for you I think it will be freedom, or enough to keep you alive and well. Students to teach, music to play. . . . You can conduct a live orchestra, when you've taught one. You were not ambitious, Mr. Mantenon, and so you will not miss the power you might have held at the Academy. You can curse me, as the representative of the government that tricked you, and go on with your life. But there's one other thing you should know." Again she paused, this time turning her head as if to ease a stiff neck.

"You can think of it as plot within plot, as your music wove theme within theme. The government removes the dangerous, those who can wield such power as you, and protects itself . . . and yet has a way to deal with those who are too powerful for that isolation. But the truth is, Mr. Mantenon, that you *did* overpower my ship. You are free; we must return, or be listed as outlaws, and if we return, our failure will cost all of us. You hoped we would rebel, and follow you into freedom. You did not know that our ship is our freedom . . . that I had worked years for this command, and you have destroyed it. You see the government as an enemy — most artists do — but to me it is all that keeps the worlds together, providing things for each other that none can provide alone. Like the Academy, where you may send a student someday. Like my ship, in which we traveled freely. I don't expect you to believe this, not now. But we were honored to have you aboard, from the first: truly honored. And we were honored by the power of your music. And you destroyed us, and we honor you for that. A worthy enemy; a worthy loss. If you ever believe that, and understand, write us another song, and send *that.*"

And nothing lay between his hands but empty air. After a long moment he breathed again. In the silence he heard the beginnings of that song, the first he would write on his new world, the last gift to the old.

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SCIENCE

ISAAC ASIMOV

THE COSMIC LENS

THERE CAME a time in my life when it dawned on me that other people were thinking of me as a sort of celebrity, and it made me uneasy.

I was brought up by poor but honest parents, you see, very honest and very poor. I've always thought of myself as belonging to the same category, but I couldn't help but think that honesty was the more important of the two, so I strove to correct the other characteristic. Yet I couldn't help but feel that as the money piled up, the opportunities for dishonesty would grow — and what if I was lured into that vice.

So I tried to ignore the fact that I was getting unreasonably well off and continued to live simply and frugally (as far as was consistent with reasonable comfort, especially for the children). That way I could stay poor but honest.

The game wasn't going to work, however, if I was going to be treated as a celebrity, so I grew very determined not to "go Hollywood," not to expect the privileges of rank, not to demand or even accept special treatment.

Let me tell you, it's hard. And there *are* times when I can't resist temptation. I will give you an instance.

Some time ago, I was waiting at my usual corner for a taxi. I was in a reasonable hurry and no unoccupied taxis were in sight. Naturally, I began to grow unhappy.

A taxi skidded to a halt in front of me, but it contained a very noticeable fare in the back seat, so I paid no attention to it but continued to look glumly in the direction of oncoming traffic. The front window cranked down, however, and the cabbie leaned out. He had obviously recognized me.

"Dr. Asimov," he said, "I'm a fan of yours and I'd pick you up, but I have a fare."

"Thank you. I appreciate your thoughtfulness," I said.

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The taxi was about to move on, but the rear window cranked down and the fare leaned out and said, "Dr. Asimov, I'm a fan of yours, too. Get in!"

What I should have said at that point was, "No, thank you. I want no special treatment. I'll wait for an empty taxi like anyone else."

But I didn't. I got in. I tried to make up for it by insisting on paying for both of us, but what it amounts to is that I took advantage of my position and accepted the privilege. It bothers me.

And yet — Every month I take advantage of my position and accept privilege. Do you suppose that anyone else could talk our Noble Editor into letting him do a monthly science column? Of course not. I'm the only one — because I'm old and venerated and have been doing it for years. Ought I to say, "Mr. Ferman, I want no special treatment. Throw this spot open to anyone, and take the best."

No, sir, I won't do it. Not in a million years. And it doesn't bother me, either, so let's get on with it.

In 1916, Albert Einstein (1879-1955) advanced his general theory of relativity and pointed out that, if the theory were correct, light ought to curve in its path in a gravitational field. The amount of curvature would be immeasurably small under ordinary circumstances (on Earth, for instance), but circumstances might be extraordinary.

Suppose the light rays from a star passed very near the rim of the Sun on its way to Earth. In that case, the curvature (toward the Sun) might be great enough to make the star seem slightly farther from the Sun than it ought to be, because the eye would follow the ray back, so to speak, in a straight line, not allowing for the curvature.

Naturally, a star that would be so close to the Sun that its light would just skim the solar disc, would not be seen in the Sun's glare — *unless* there happened to be a total eclipse at the time.

But in 1916, Europe was in the very midst of World War I, and eclipse expeditions were out of the question. Still, the British astronomer Arthur S. Eddington (1882-1944) obtained a copy of Einstein's paper and began making plans.

The war came to an end on November 11, 1918, and that left time to schedule eclipse expeditions on May 29, 1919, when an eclipse was scheduled when the Sun happened to be in the midst of an array of bright stars.

Eddington organized two expeditions, one to northern Brazil and one to an island off the coast of West Africa. The positions of the bright stars near the Sun were

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measured relative to each other, and this was compared with those same relative positions a half year later when the Sun was in the opposite section of the sky. The results were borderline but were taken to support Einstein. (Since then, of course, similar experiments, carried out far more precisely, have left no doubt that Einstein was correct.)

The notion of the curvature of light by gravitational fields gave rise to some interesting speculation. The Sun is so large that a ray of starlight can pass to one side or another and be bent. But what if the ray of light from a distant star passed by the rim of another but nearer star. The ray of light might be thick enough so that part of it would pass to one side of the nearer star and part to the other side.

Both parts of the ray would be bent inward toward the nearer star. Therefore, the eye of an observer on Earth would follow one part of the ray in a straight line in one direction and the other part in a straight line in another direction. Instead of seeing one distant star beyond the nearer star, we would see *two*, one on one side of the nearer star and one on the other.

This was first suggested in a casual way in 1924.

In 1936, Einstein himself took up the matter and subjected it to careful mathematical analysis. The nearer star, by splitting a ray of distant starlight in two and bringing the two to a focus, more or less, on Earth, was acting in a fashion analogous to that of a glass lens. Einstein therefore called the phenomenon a "gravitational lens."

He showed that, indeed, the distant star would be seen as two stars. If the distant star were a tiny bit to one side of the center of the nearer "lensing" star, more of its light would skim by that side of the star, less by the other side. Therefore, of the pair of stars that would be seen, one would be brighter than the other, but both would have precisely the same spectrum in all respects, since observers would really be seeing the same star.

If, however, the more distant star were *precisely* behind the nearer star, the light from the distant star would pass by the rim of the nearer star on every side and we would see the nearer star surrounded by a tiny ring of light that would be the lens distortion of the more distant star. That would be an "Einstein ring."

This was fascinating theory, but (it seemed to Einstein in 1936, and to other astronomers of the time) there seemed no chance at all of finding examples of gravitational lenses in the sky.

In the first place, despite the

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vast number of telescopically visible stars in the sky, the chances of finding one star exactly, or almost exactly, behind another is so excessively tiny that looking for an example was quite likely to be labor wasted.

Besides, even the gravitational intensity at a stellar surface is not very large in terms of star light. The light is curved so slightly that the two rays from opposite sides of the star would have to travel an enormous number of light years before coming close enough to focus. In other words, any gravitational lens in the form of a star would have to be very far away from the Earth, and the more distant star whose image is being distorted would have to be much farther away still.

In fact, the distorted image would be so far away that it was likely to be too dim to be seen at all, and there could certainly be no useful spectrum to be gotten from it. Therefore, one couldn't judge whether two stars that seemed very close in the sky, might have the same spectrum and therefore possibly be two images of a single star, or have different spectra and be two distinct and unrelated stars.

Of course, some stars have more intense gravitational fields than others do. In 1915, the American astronomer Walter Sydney Adams (1876-1956) had discovered that Sirius's companion star, "Sirius B," was what we now call a "white dwarf." It packed all the mass of a star like the Sun into a condensed body smaller than the Earth, so that the gravitational field near its surface was tens of thousands that of the surface of an ordinary star. (He proved this by demonstrating in 1924 that the light from Sirius B had a red shift produced by its intense gravitational field, as Einstein's general relativity had predicted.)

For that reason, if it were a white dwarf that acted as a lensing star, a distant star's rays would be curved more sharply and the focal length would be shorter. The distorted image might then be nearer to us and, therefore, bright enough to be visible to us, perhaps. There are so few white dwarfs as compared with ordinary stars, however, that the shorter focal length is more than made up for by the greater unlikelihood of a gravitational lens situation at all.

IF, THEN, all we had to deal with were stars, Einstein's theoretical investigations would represent the end of the story. The Universe is *not* just a matter of stars, however, as was quite evident even in 1936.

In the 1920's, it was established

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that certain "nebulae" (small fuzzy objects) were actually independent galaxies located far outside our own. There were thousands and millions of them spread out over millions, tens of millions and hundreds of millions of light years.

It follows, then, that if we're talking galactic lenses we oughtn't to talk just about stars-behind-stars. But hindsight is cheap. Right now, I can see the inevitability of going beyond stars with half an eye and a hundredth of a brain, but in 1936, Einstein himself, lacking the benefit of hindsight, didn't see it.

It was in 1937 that the Swiss astronomer Fritz Zwicky (1898-1974), who was interested in the distant galaxies, did see it. He pointed out that as the Universe was revealing itself to be richer and richer in galaxies, it might be only a matter of time before one galaxy would be discovered that was exactly in front of another and more distant galaxy; or perhaps, one cluster of galaxies would be exactly in front of another and more distant cluster, and then gravitational lens effects might be noted.

Let's see what the advantages of the galaxy-galaxy gravitational lens would be as compared with the star-star situation.

In the first place, stars are essentially points of light, so that the chance of one point of light being positioned right behind another, as we view them, is very slight. Galaxies, on the other hand, are extended bodies, small, of course, but far from points. It is possible then that even if galaxies are not one behind the other, center to center, there might nevertheless be a partial overlap, and that may be enough to produce a gravitational lens effect. A galaxy overlap is therefore much more likely than a star overlap.

Secondly, since galaxies contain anywhere from a billion to a trillion stars, they can be seen, and their spectra studied, at hundreds of times the distance of even the brightest individual stars of the ordinary kind. The more distant an object is, the greater the number of other objects likely to be lying more or less between it and ourselves, and the greater the chance that one of those intermediate objects may be close enough to the travelling ray of light from the distant object to produce a lens effect.

Thirdly, the more distant an object is, the more likely it is that the long focal length of a galactic lens may come sufficiently to focus at Earth to allow us to see the distortions that have been produced.

Are there disadvantages? Yes. In the star-star situation, where you are dealing with two point sources

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of light, the lens effect is a simple one, and you will get either two stars or (very unlikely) an Einstein ring.

In the galaxy-galaxy situation, with two extended sources which are not evenly bright from point to point, the lens effect is much more complicated. You can get three images or five. These can be asymmetrically placed and show tortured shapes that may not seem to be lens effects at first glance.

And yet even the consideration of galaxies rather than stars did not raise the chances of a gravitational lens sufficiently. At least, for over forty years after Zwicky's suggestion, no case of a gravitational lens anywhere in the sky forced itself on astronomers' attention.

This was despite the fact that a number of astronomical discoveries were made that seemed to increase the chances of a gravitational lens, or to make it easier to observe one.

For instance, Zwicky himself had pointed out that novas came in two types. Ordinary novas represented relatively minor gas explosions on the surface of white dwarfs. There were, however, "supernovas" that represented the explosion of most or all of a star. Supernovas could shine, for a brief period, with the luminosity of billions of ordinary stars, and since supernovas rivalled the brightness of an entire galaxy, they could be seen as far as a galaxy could.

By now over 400 supernovas have been detected in distant galaxies (and, in 1987, there was one in the nearest of them, the Large Magellanic Cloud). Think if the light of one of them (a point source for all its brilliance) passed through an intense gravitational field on the way to us. It is conceivable we might see *two* supernovas explode close together at more or less the same time (one distorted light path might be longer than the other and therefore take a bit longer to reach us) and rise and fall with the same rhythm while displaying the same spectrum. It would be an obvious case of a gravitational lens.

However, the number of supernovas is far smaller than the number of galaxies, and each supernova is a temporary phenomenon so that the lens distortion would be equally temporary instead of being a virtually permanent feature of the sky as other gravitational lenses might be. In any case, no such distorted supernova has yet been seen.

Then, too, in 1969, pulsars were discovered. These are neutron stars that exist as a result of supernovas that have exploded in the past. They have all the mass of an ordinary star compressed into a sphere no more than the size of a small asteroid. The gravitational intensity

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near its surface is some millions of times as great as that near a white dwarf.

In addition, astronomers have become convinced that black holes exist. These represent even more monstrously condensed pieces of matter and can have, in their vicinity, gravitational fields even more intense than that of a neutron star.

Therefore a galaxy need not have its light interfered with by another galaxy. The light may pass near a neutron star or a black hole and be wrenched out of its straight-line path more sharply than might be managed by the gravitational field of a mere galaxy. The focal length would thus be shortened, and, again, we would have a greater chance to see the lens effects.

The most important discovery of all, however, came in 1963, when quasars were detected. What had seemed to be ordinary and undistinguished stars of our own Galaxy raised suspicion by being the sources of detectable amounts of radio waves. Closer examination showed that they had enormous red shifts and had to be ultra distant.

Nowadays some 2000 quasars are known. They are actually galaxies with extraordinarily bright and active centers. Because they are so far away we see only those centers, which have the appearance of stars, and we do not usually see the faint haze of the rest of the galaxy.

Even the nearest quasar is a billion light years away, farther off than any ordinary galaxy we can see. Some quasars, recently discovered, seem to be as much as 17 billion light years away.

Clearly, then, if we're looking for gravitational lenses, we ought to concentrate on the quasars. They are so far away that the chances of having something on the line between them and us increases markedly. They are essentially point sources so the effects oughtn't to be too complicated. And there are sufficiently few quasars so that if a "double quasar" is found, the two being quite close together, it should at once become an object of suspicion. And if the spectra turn out to be more or less identical, that's it.

Actually, a photograph showing a double quasar in the constellation, Ursa Major, was taken in the early 1950's. They were so close together that they seemed to overlap.

On March 29, 1979, the double quasar known as 0957+561 was studied closely by scientists at Kitt Peak National Observatory and was found to be separated by 6 arcseconds. (By comparison, the width of the full Moon is 1865 arcseconds.) The chance of two quasars being that close together in the sky

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just as a result of random distribution is pretty small.

Furthermore, a study of the spectra of the two quasars showed them to be identical in all features. They had the same lines with the same relative prominence and the same red shift, showing them to be at the same distance. The conclusion had to be that the two quasars were separate images of a single quasar, the double image being produced by a gravitational lens.

But what was serving as the lensing object?

Astronomers brought to bear their most sensitive light-detecting devices and spotted, between the double quasar and ourselves, a very distant (and therefore very dim) cluster of galaxies. Such clusters usually center about a giant elliptical galaxy that has grown at the expense of the smaller galaxies about it.

There *was* such a giant galaxy in the cluster, and that giant was directly in front of the double quasar. (It did not obscure the double quasar because the quasar could be detected by radio waves that passed right through the elliptical galaxy between it and ourselves.) Undoubtedly, this elliptical galaxy was the lensing object.

Since then, seven more cases of objects that seem to be the result of gravitational lenses have been detected, though none seem to be as clearcut as the first, and only one other has a clear lensing object (a spiral galaxy) between it and ourselves. In addition, there are ten more objects that *might* be lens effects. All seventeen objects, by the way, are quasars.

Most exciting of all, in 1987, a small object was discovered in the constellation Leo that has the shape of a tiny ring of radio radiation and shows all the earmarks of being the Einstein ring that Einstein had predicted fifty years before. It is the first one discovered.

Astronomers are naturally delighted by the beauty and rarity of the phenomenon, and by its example of a daring prediction, an ingenious search, and a jubilant finding, but it doesn't end there. There remains a great deal that may be accomplished by way of gravitational lenses.

In the first place, the mere existence of gravitational lenses supports once again the theory of general relativity which, for three-quarters of a century, has met every test, and which is the only useful mathematical description we have of the Universe as a whole. Those small distorted images and that tiny ring of radio waves assures us, once more, that we are on the right track and that we seem to be under-

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standing the Universe.

Secondly, just as a glass lens can magnify an image that it brings into focus, so a gravitation lens may magnify the object it distorts. (This, too, was first suggested by Zwicky.)

This means that we have an unbelievably gigantic microscope that might show us the inner structure of a quasar, details that we might not be able to make out ordinarily. Astronomers would desperately love to have such information, for quasars seem to be a phenomenon of the youth of the Universe, and anything that will increase our knowledge of that youth may help us come to conclusions as to the very beginnings of the galaxies and of the Universe itself.

Then, too, as I said earlier, when a gravitational lens bends a beam of light on one side or another, splitting it into several different beams, those beams follow different paths, and one path may be longer than another. Since the curvature is, at best, slight, the paths are not very different in length proportionately, but this difference can be calculated from the geometry of the situation even if we don't know the actual distance of the quasar being distorted or the lens doing the distorting.

It may turn out, for instance, that one path is one-billionth longer than another path. That's not much, but if the total length of the journey from the quasar to us is five billion light years, then one beam will reach us five years after the other.

Since both beams have already arrived, however, how can we know which arrived first and by how much?

If the beams were steady in intensity, we would be out of luck. Quasars, however, sometimes show variations in their brightness. If one of the images of a multiple quasar suddenly brightens, we need simply wait for the others to brighten as their beams arrive. From the geometry and from the time lag, astronomers could calculate the distance of the quasar far more accurately than can be done by any other method.

From the distances of several quasars, determined in this fashion, and from the value of their red shifts, astronomers can calculate the value of "Hubble's constant" — the rate at which distance increases with the size of the red shift. This constant is now known only very roughly and there is much dispute over it. A good value will enable us to get a truer picture of the size and age of the Universe than anything we have now.

Then, too, there is the nature of the lensing material between the quasars and ourselves. Most of the

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few cases of gravitational lenses so far pinned down have nothing visible between them and us.

Perhaps the light passes by a neutron star or a black hole which we cannot possibly observe directly at that distance, but whose presence we might deduce from the distortion of the quasar.

More important still, astronomers wonder if there might not be a large quantity of mass in the Universe which, for one reason or another, we can't detect and don't take into account. That "missing mass" may account for the way in which galaxies rotate, or clusters of galaxies hang together. It may even indicate that the Universe is closed and will some day collapse, instead of expanding forever.

The bending of the light by quasars may give us a hint as to the nature of the missing mass, its location, and its quantity.

Gravitational lenses may also explain certain puzzles that hound astronomers today. There are cases of quasars with high red shifts being in apparently close association with objects of much lower red shifts. There are cases of radio sources that seem to be separating at speeds faster than light. It might be possible to find explanations of such anomalies by making use of the gravitational lensing phenomenon.

There are also thoughts about "strings," which would be folds in the space-time continuum that formed at the start of the Universe and represent exceedingly long, nearly one-dimensional objects of enormous mass. The light of a quasar that happens to intersect such a string would have the light on either side of the string bent far more than by any other lensing agent. The focal length would decrease, and the two images of the quasar would seem to be separated in space to a far greater extent than anything we have so far seen.

As a matter of fact, two quasars were found separated by 157 arcseconds. They had similar spectra and, for a while, astronomers thought they might have the first piece of evidence in favor of the existence of strings. However a closer look at the spectra showed that they were not similar enough. The two quasars were, quite clearly, two *different* quasars.

In order to get the full benefit of gravitational lenses, to be sure, astronomers must find as many as possible, and so some of them are eagerly planning sweeps of the sky in a general search.

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This is Alan Brennert's first story here in 15 years, but he's hardly been idle. Since then he's had about three dozen teleplays produced and served for two years as Executive Story Consultant on CBS's revival of The Twilight Zone. *Mr Brennert has also published two novels and has a third, TIME AND CHANCE, upcoming from Tor. His first story here since "A Winter Memory" (November 1974) is a compelling tale of a thief who is transformed into something quite remarkable. . .*

HEALER

By Alan Brennert

THERE WAS ANOTHER DISturbance in the Citadel today; Ta'li'n saw it from his hidden room in the temple atop the Pyramid of the Sun — a short, bloody skirmish between followers of the Old Order and proponents of the New. The latter were armed not merely with clubs and daggers, as in the past, but with atlatls, as well — spears tipped with gray or green obsidian points — and Ta'li'n noted with sadness that the followers of the Old had taken up weapons of their own: daggers, slings, a few knives edged in black obsidian. The confrontation was more evenly matched than previous ones, and briefer; both sides dispersed upon arrival of the Priests' Guards with atlatls of their own, the two factions leaving a bloody trail both north and south along the broad, two-mile-long avenue that bisected the City — a road that would one day, Ta'li'n thought ruefully, be aptly known as the Avenue of the Dead.

Past, present, and future all seemed to be fighting for dominion over

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the priest's soul. The past was a glorious lure, a dangerous seduction on which he could not afford — yet could not avoid — dwelling. From up here, the City was still beautiful, still vibrant, the undisputed capital of a continent; not ever the Maya had built a home as large, as populous, as this city that the Aztecs would rechristen Teotihuacán — whose true name would be as obscured by time and history even as its temples, its pyramids, its courts, and its palaces would be covered over by mounds of dirt and tangles of guayule scrub. But now, at this moment, it was still alive, some twenty square miles of it, and he could see, from this tallest pyramid at the center of the City, the ceremonial platforms lining the broad, expansive avenue; the Pyramid of the Moon to the north; the — what would they call it, centuries from now? — the Temple of Quetzalcoatl to the south. The frescoes and facades blazed with vivid colors — bright reds, whites, golds — and the marketplace was thronging with merchants and traders from as far away as the Gulf Coast, bartering for the City's famed obsidian, or its Thin Orange pottery. Ta'li'n's people had lived here, in peace and prosperity, for nearly seven hundred years; and staring out now at the City, the rioters no longer in sight, business as usual being conducted in the Great Compound, it was easy to believe that it would continue so forever. But the present, that eternal Now, was as dangerous a lure as the past; only the future mattered, as terrible and unfathomable as it was, or would be.

Returning to his meditation, and to the peyote that induced it, he placed another of the mescal caps on his tongue; it burned, sharply, for several moments, then all sensation was lost as the vision took form behind his closed eyelids. For an instant he hoped that this time, perhaps, the future would show him a different face, a kinder countenance —

But it was the same vision: always the same. The City, center of light and peace for six and a half centuries, in flames. The Temple of X'l'o — the god renamed Quetzalcoatl by those-who-would-follow — would be stripped of its color, the plumed serpents adorning its face reduced to dun reflections of their present glory, and the City itself, the thousands of private dwelling places . . . all that, set to the torch. A fire that would burn for days, turning nights into a kind of constant dawn, a flickering orange glow that could be seen as far away as Oaxaca. Pillars of black smoke would rise from one end of the avenue to the other, eclipsing even the massive presence of the sacred mountain, Tenan, for centuries the home

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of the water goddess, X'la'n — or Tlaloc, as she would be known.

Tlaloc. A strange name, he thought, invented by those-who-would-follow; yet somehow the idea that they would never know her true name, nor even that of the City itself, gave him odd comfort as he watched that city's destruction — better, perhaps, to be an object of anonymous mystery than of indifferent notoriety. He did not care if such thoughts seemed stoic, or overly philosophic; he had seen the vision too many times, these past months, to spare any more tears for it — especially now that the event itself, the reality of it, was so frighteningly close.

If he was to save any of his golden city — to preserve any of its achievements, these past six centuries — he would have to act, soon.

A drifter lay sleeping at the mouth of the alley, a two-day-old *Times* wrapped around him like a blanket, a rain-soaked carton for his pillow; if he heard or felt the rat scuttling at the tattered cuffs of his pants, he gave no indication of it — no more notice than he gave the short, somewhat feral young man at the far blind end of the alley. Dark-haired, bony, with a build more likely to be called wiry than strong, Jackie Thompson nervously tugged on the straps of the rope harness as he slipped it over his stooped shoulders; he hated this thing, hated the way the straps cut into his skin no matter how many layers of clothing he wore — he still had rope burns under his arms from the last time he'd used it. Nervously glancing toward the mouth of the alley and the lighted street beyond, he reeled in the twenty feet of rope and fingered the rusty grappling hook at its end; he knew it was too dark for anyone to clearly see him from the street, but he couldn't help it, couldn't help the pounding of his heart or the sweat on his palms or the small twitch at the corner of his eye. Even after fifteen years of second-story work, he had to take deep breaths, had to ignore that small mocking voice inside that told him he was no good at this, that he was a loser and a screwup and a putz. Rubello's voice sometimes; sometimes his own.

It was probably only his stubborn defiance of that voice that had kept him in this business all this time; that even now made him raise the grappling hook and, winding up like a swarthy Mickey Mouse, let it fly —up onto the roof of the two-story museum. It landed with an unwelcome clang, but Jackie was too busy trying to stifle a cry of pain to pay it any mind — he'd wrenched his shoulder, still tender from the fall he'd taken

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last month, that botched jewelry job on Fairfax. Doing his best to ignore the pain, he yanked on the rope, just enough so that the hook snagged on an outcropping of ledge; then, gingerly testing its hold, he took the rope in two hands and began slowly ascending the brick wall, half-expecting his luck to unravel along with the rope — relieved and a little amazed when he actually made it to the second-story window.

He took a glass cutter from his jacket pocket, placed a small suction cup on the bottom half of the window, and began cutting a hand-sized half-oval in the glass. Earlier he'd broken into the museum's alarm box and rigged a parallel circuit at the junction controlling this wing of the building; now, as he gripped the suction cup, pulled out the half-oval of glass, and reached inside to raise open the window, that parallel circuit was telling the alarm system that everything was just copacetic, that the perimeter alarm on the window was intact and the sensors under the plush museum carpeting were likewise undisturbed as Jackie clambered inside. He slipped off the rope harness and left it dangling — uncomfortably resembling a noose — from the roof; taking out his flashlight, he began to make his way through the deserted museum, the red wink of motion sensors in far corners noting his presence, but unable to get their warning past the bypass circuit Jackie had installed. At the same time he'd been careful not to place the circuit board *too* far downline: shunting the downstairs alarms out of the system could potentially have attracted some attention.

Still, for all this, he felt no less nervous. He'd breached the museum, as intended, in the Mesoamerican wing, the section his sources had told him was least patrolled, most remote from the guard station on the ground floor. Padding silently through, he swept his flashlight beam from side to side, illuminating statuary too large to transport: a reclining porcelain figure of Chac Mool, the Aztec rain god; a fresco, bright even after the bleaching of centuries of sun and dust, of the water goddess, Tlaloc; a bronze metalwork of Quetzalcoatl, the feathered serpent —

A phone rang.

Jackie stopped dead. The ring was muffled, distant, from downstairs; after another short ring, someone picked it up, and he could hear the indistinct drone of someone's voice — a guard, obviously — talking.

Suddenly impatient, Jackie began casting about for something small, something he could snatch and grab and get the hell out of here. He

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stopped at a glass display case, and in the wash of his floodlights he saw a bronze plaque: TEOTIHUACANOS RELIGIOUS ARTIFACTS, CA. A.D. 650 — COURTESY MUSEO NACIONAL DE ANTROPOLOGIA, MEXICO CITY. Inside were half a dozen objects, none larger than ten inches across: a mask made of some dark green stone, with slits for eyes and a broad, flat nose; some sort of gray vessel in the shape of a jaguar's foot, one of its six claws broken at the joint; another jaguar, this one a black obsidian figurine; a stone model of a Teotihuacános temple, with its distinctive four-tiered *talud-tablero* style.

Dimly, he was aware that the voice downstairs had ceased; he stood, frustrated, at the display case before him and swore silently to himself.

All the research he'd done on the museum's collection was doing him damned little good just now. He had assumed, naively, that the more valuable artifacts would be identifiable by their material — gold or jade, say, easy to recognize, easy to carry. But none of these looked particularly —

A door shut downstairs, followed hard upon by the sound of footsteps — ascending stairs.

Jackie's first instinct was to run, but that mocking voice within him would surely torment him later should he leave without something to show for his efforts. He swung his flashlight along the display case again —

And this time his attention was caught by a polished oval stone perhaps two inches high, flashing a lustrous green in the lamplight; it looked marbled, with black highlights. Jackie's heart raced faster. Jade? Yes, of course; it had to be. Hurriedly, he jimmied the lock on the display case, lifted the glass cover —

And an alarm sounded throughout the museum.

As the klaxon began its shrieking alert, Jackie's bladder chose to empty itself at the same moment. Oh Christ, he thought. He thought he'd gotten the full scope on the system, but in his caution not to disable *all* the alarms, he must've placed the circuit not downline *enough*; he'd accidentally left the systems functioning in this room. *Damn* it! He'd fucked up royally this time — he had to get *out* of here. He snapped up the smallest object in the case — the oval stone, burnished like metal and yet, somehow, not metal — and bolted out of the room, frantically retracing his path. Behind him he heard the sound of footsteps pounding up the hardwood stairs, then softening as they took to the thick museum carpeting.

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He felt a wave of relief — prematurely — as he reached the window through which he'd first entered; he opened it again, started to reel in the rope harness —

"Hold it!"

Jackie whipped around to see a security guard silhouetted in combat stance in the doorway, a .38 gripped firmly with both hands, pointed directly at the fleeing thief. Jackie froze for an instant, then, panicked, forgot about the harness, spun round, and started to clamber out the window.

The guard fired.

Straddling the window, Jackie took the bullet in the abdomen and cried out in pain; that and the velocity of the bullet's impact sent him pitching sideways out the window. The world turned upside down, there was a fire in his stomach, and he was falling, two stories, the ground somehow *above* him, a thin cord of blood streaming out of him like a vapor trail —

He plummeted twenty feet to the ground, a messy fall broken inadequately by a couple of garbage cans and a mound of rancid trash. Stunned and in shock, he caught a glimpse of the guard poking his head out of the window above, then vanishing. *Move,* Jackie told himself. *You've got to move.* The lancing pain in his stomach intensified as he staggered to his feet; it became unbearable as he took a step forward, nearly buckling on what was probably a broken ankle. But something propelled him forward; something sent him stumbling down the alley, round a bend, and into another alley; in one hand he still unconsciously clutched the jade stone he had stolen, while with the other he sought to hold his lacerated skin together, blood streaming out between his fingers as he stumbled on. Oh God, he thought, oh Jesus, please, please help; I'm sorry, I'm sorry, please *help* me. . . .

There were sirens now, and, above the roofs of nearby buildings, the red flashing corona of police cars drawing closer. Finally, in an alley behind a dry-cleaning store on Figueroa Street, the pain became too much; he could go no farther. He slumped behind a low wall separating this store's parking lot from the next, he held his hand uselessly over the bleeding wound, . . . and, soundlessly, he began to weep, and to pray: "Jesus, oh Jesus, I'm *sorry,* I'm an idiot, I'm a thief, but please, let me *live* — I'll get it right next time, I swear; just let me live, oh sweet Christ, just let me *live* —

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Slowly, he became aware of something other than the pain in his stomach, or the throbbing in his ankle. He became aware of a growing warmth in his right hand . . . a soothing warmth that he soon felt, as well, in his wounded abdomen, a warmth that blotted out the pain. He looked up at his balled-up hand . . . and saw *light*, a pulsing white glow leaking out from between the fingers of his fist. Oh God, he thought. Was he dying? Don't you see white light when you die? He uncurled his fingers long enough to see the stone — no longer jade green, no longer marbled, but white-hot, like the heart of a star — yet he felt no pain, no scorching heat, just . . . warmth. There, and in his stomach. Dazed, he closed his fist around the stone once more, not understanding, but waiting until the warmth totally obliterated the pain; then he got to his feet and began running, still holding his side, still clutching the stone, afraid to let go of either. He ran strongly, as strongly as you can on a broken ankle, and within minutes he had made his way through the maze of alleys and side streets of downtown Los Angeles, losing himself amid the homeless who peopled its quiet corners.

When he was far enough away from the sirens and the police cars, he leaned up against a brick wall and, for the first time, looked down at himself. Slowly, he took his hand away from the blood-soaked sweatshirt he was wearing; the warmth had dissipated, but the pain had not returned. He rolled up his shirt, steeling himself for what he was certain he would see —

And instead, saw . . . nothing. No gaping bullet wound, no powder burns, no blood . . . just smooth, unbroken skin. As though he'd never been shot at all.

Stumbling half from disbelief and half from his swollen ankle, he made his way to a pay phone, dropped a quarter in the slot, and called Harry. Harry would come and pick him up, and then he'd be safe. Harry was always there; always would be there.

But it had not been Harry who had saved Jackie's life; that much he knew. Dimly he realized that he'd struck a bargain a little earlier tonight — with whom or with what, he wasn't sure, but a bargain nonetheless, an agreement written and sealed in blood; a bargain he was sure he couldn't back out of, and — even more strangely — a promise he didn't *want* to renege on. . . .

* * *

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Even the shadow of sacred Tenan offered little relief from the blistering sun; Ta'li'n felt drained, light-headed, after his long ascent up the steep slopes of the valley. Or perhaps it was the sight of row upon row of failing crops, maize and beans and squash dying on the vine, that made him sway and teeter; he stopped, turned, and looked back down into the valley, seeing terrace upon terrace of irrigation canals lying parched and dry. For centuries, Tenan, and the rain goddess, X'la'n, who dwelled within, had provided water to this thirsty land, these otherwise infertile slopes whose crops fed the hungry city below. X'la'n had shaped the volcanic mountain in such a way as to capture the rainfall, to channel it into a stream that fed the canals. The dwelling structure at the valley floor — home to the hundreds of farmers who tilled this land, and the priests who administered them — was adorned with a brightly painted facade, nearly all the bas-relief statues carved in the squat likeness of the water goddess. The correct rituals were still performed each day, the just and proper offerings made in her honor; but the canals were still dry, and the sound of the river that ran inside the mountain — once a constant, mighty rumble — was now just a thin whisper on the wind.

One of the administrator-priests from the dwelling place below drew abreast of Ta'li'n; he had followed at a respectful distance, and now stood beside his superior and offered him a small jade figurine in the shape of the goddess. The high priest closed his eyes, wrapped his hands around the small curved devotion, and prayed.

He stood, motionless, silent, for a full minute — until a brief cooling around him caused him to open his eyes. He looked up; a gray storm cloud pressed low over the valley, blocking the sun, so near it seemed to touch Tenan itself. For a brief moment the priest allowed himself to hope, and, hoping, closed his eyes once more, hands tighter around the talisman as he continued his prayer. It seemed like hours before the first raindrops, carried on the southerly breeze, brushed his face; he opened his eyes again — but, far from feeling joy at the light mist that had fanned across the valley, he felt only misery. He had conjured similar mist before with this talisman, once a steady rain that had lasted nearly twenty minutes — but what he had been praying for was a cloudburst, a downpour that would split the skies with thunder and fill Tenan, and the canals, with water; he had prayed that the crops might be restored, the exodus from the starving city halted, the unrest within it quelled. And instead, he received a light

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mist that was passing even now . . . the storm cloud dissipating in the hot, dry wind, exposing the brutal sun.

He had prayed, yet known his prayers would be fruitless: he had seen the future, and it contained neither rain nor food — merely ash and flame. The other priest had observed such failures before; he looked respectfully away, to the west, where the sun was falling into the abyss from which it climbed, triumphant, every morning.

"I shall take this," Ta'li'n announced suddenly, weighing the jade figurine in his hand, "back to the temple, where I might consult the Tonalpohialli." It was a lie — the Tonalpohialli, which the high priests used to predict the coming cycle, had yielded the same bleak answers as the peyote — but a convincing one. "As you wish," the administrator said hopefully — then turned and headed down the terraced slopes, to carry a glimmer of false hope back to his fellows.

Ta'li'n hefted the small devotion. The talisman still worked, up to a point; the power vested in it by the gods still lingered. But it, and the two or three others like it used so successfully over the centuries, possessed not nearly enough power to replenish the barren canals. Only the gods, working through the talismans, could do that.

He turned and looked down at the City; the Great Compound was crowded not just with merchants and traders, but pilgrims drawn to the City's great shrines — hundreds of them making the journey each year, to worship and to honor. They called the City "the home of the gods" — would continue to call it that, the priest knew, even in its nameless future — and yet —

And yet there were other cities — Oaxaca, Xochicalco, El Tajín — and other cultures — the Zapotecs to the west, the Mayans along the gulf, even the warlike Toltecs to the north — rising in ascendancy across the continent. Was it possible — could it be that —

The priest shivered despite the oppressive heat.

Could the gods have found another home?

HARRY FAULK was an owlish man in his late fifties, with thinning brown hair, watery eyes set deep beneath arched eyebrows, and a cast to his face that made it seem as though he were always frowning: as though gravity and age had permanently turned down the corners of his mouth, making the creases and wrinkles of his face look forever disapproving, or cynical. Certainly he was frowning

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when he picked up Jackie at the corner of Figueroa and Temple; he helped the younger man, who could barely take a step without pain, into the car, then looked at him — at the ankle swollen to the size of a grapefruit — and sighed heavily. "We'll stop at a 7-Eleven," he said, shifting the gears of his dilapidated Oldsmobile, "and pick up some ice for that ankle." He turned his gaze to the road as he swung left onto Temple, toward the Harbor Freeway. "But first let's put a little distance between you and wherever you were." The car swung onto the freeway on-ramp, and Jackie felt himself relax at last as the Olds merged into the anonymous stream of cars heading north on the 110, carrying him safely and forever away from police cars, from flashing lights, from gunshots in the dark.

Jackie told him where he'd been and what had happened — omitting the gunshot and the wound, the bloody traces of which couldn't be seen in the dimness of the car; omitting, too, the aftermath, the stone, the healing — and Harry's face grew even more disapproving than usual. "Christ," he said in disgust. "How many times have I told you, museums aren't worth the trouble. Half the stuff's too big to carry, and the other half's too hard to move once you've boosted it." Just ahead the Harbor split in two: on the right becoming the Pasadena Freeway; on the left, the Hollywood. Harry veered to the left.

"No more museums," Jackie promised distantly. His right hand, hidden from Harry's view, still clutched the stone, no longer white, no longer warm — a deceptively cool green stone. He wondered how he would tell Harry about it, and what had happened back in the alley. Harry would never believe it — Jackie could hardly blame him for that — but there had never been any secrets between the two of them, and Jackie was not going to start now, not when he'd been given this second chance . . . a chance he wanted desperately to share with his friend.

Harry Faulk was the closest thing to a father Jackie had ever known; his own father was a dream, a memory of beard stubble and big, callused hands holding his son aloft — a lingering scent of after-shave or cologne, and that was all. He had left when Jackie was four, and to this day, Jackie could not recall his face. Jackie and Faulk had first met, briefly, ten years ago, back when Jackie was a runner for Joseph Rubello. Three years later Jackie found himself sharing a cell with Harry at Vacaville: the younger man serving ten months for burglary; the older, a year and a half for mail-order fraud. When Harry got out, Jackie found him a cheap one-

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bedroom in the two-story yellow-stucco courtyard apartments on Fountain, off Highland Boulevard in Hollywood, where Jackie had already taken up residence. Since then they'd executed a succession of seldom risky but only marginally profitable swindles, scams, and the occasional burglary — usually enough to pay for food and rent, but not much more. And on their sporadic solo efforts — like Jackie's, tonight — there was an unvoiced, unwritten understanding between them: if either made that big score first, he would cut the other in.

Harry took the Highland exit off the freeway and headed toward a convenience store a few blocks north of Hollywood and Highland. He dug in his pocket for change. "I got a buck in here for some ice," he began. "I'll stop and—"

"Forget the ice," Jackie said suddenly. It had just occurred to him how he would convince Harry of all that had happened this night. "I won't need it."

"What the hell's wrong with you?" Harry said. "You got an ankle the size of an emerging nation, you might've broken it—"

"I did break it," Jackie said. "I felt the bone snap."

"Then we get you some ice, take you to an emergency room, and get that taped or splinted or whatever the hell they do, and—"

"I *won't need it*, Harry," he insisted doggedly. Somehow Jackie convinced him that he wasn't in shock, wasn't delirious or drunk or stoned, and got him to take him not to the nearest hospital, but home — finally by lying, by telling him that the security guard at the museum saw him hobble away, and that showing up at an ER with a broken ankle might not be such a good idea just now. "O.K.," Harry allowed. "We'll wait till tomorrow, find a private doctor. But we can still stop for some ice."

Back in Jackie Thompson's bleak little single apartment, with its scuffed linoleum floors and its foam-rubber couch that doubled for a bed, Harry Faulk watched as the young man showed him the green marbled stone he had stolen; watched as Jackie closed his fingers around it, then cupped his other hand around his broken, swollen ankle; watched as light spilled out from between the fingers of Jackie's fist, and as the swelling began to perceptibly shrink before his eyes. He stood, transfixed, as Jackie, eyes shut, seemed to concentrate . . . seemed to *will* the swelling smaller and smaller . . . until, finally, the white light faded, Jackie took his hand away from his foot . . . and Harry stood staring in awe and disbelief at

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the perfectly normal, unbruised, unswollen ankle. Jackie stood up and grinned; not only could he stand without support, he even danced a few giddy tap steps, to Harry's utter astonishment.

"Jackie . . . how in the *hell*—"

Jackie told him then; all of it. And now, no longer in the concealing darkness of the car, Harry could see Jackie's blood-soaked sweatshirt, which rolled up to reveal absolutely nothing — nothing, certainly, to account for the dark, mottled stain on Jackie's shirt. And Harry began to believe. Not in the way Jackie believed, but the power of the stone, which he began to accept. He asked if he could hold it a moment, and as he turned the stone over in his hand, staring at it in wonder and dawning realization, he said softly, "My God, Jackie. You realize how much something like this is *worth*! We could have every goddamn hospital and research center in the country down on their *knees* for this — we could set our own *price*—"

"No," Jackie said, with a steel and a suddenness that surprised him as much as it did Harry, who looked up, startled. Jackie lowered his voice. "I struck a . . . a deal, back in that alley. To . . . change . . . if I got out of there alive."

"A *deal*!" Harry said derisively. "With who? God?"

"Maybe," Jackie said. "Why not?"

Faulk sighed, sensing his friend's determination, and backed off.

"O.K. Fine," he said. "No more burglaries. No more scams. Man, we won't *need* any of that penny-ante shit if we sell this. Look: it's simple. We find some doctor with a Beverly Hills address to front for us; he brokers the rock and gets a commission. By the time the buyers find out it's stolen property, they won't care. They'll hush it up, and we'll be set for life."

"If they hush it up, they won't go public on it, and it won't reach the people it needs to reach," Jackie said adamantly. "They'll keep it to themselves, Harry. They'll test it, and X-ray it, try to figure out ways to duplicate it — and if that doesn't work, they'll keep it to themselves and use it to cure billionaires with lung cancer. That oughta be worth a new wing to the hospital, eh? Or how about Alzheimer's? Two wings and a parking structure. Maybe even—"

"So what the hell," Harry snapped, exasperated, "do *you* want to do with the damn thing?"

Jackie hesitated only a moment.

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"I want to use it to heal people," he said quietly.

Harry stared at him in disbelief.

"Jesus H. Christ," he said softly.

Ta'li'n did not tell the other priest-rulers of his plan; they were too busy squabbling among themselves, arguing how best to appease the gods, how to put down the uprisings and nullify the proponents of the New Order. The dissension that was tearing apart the general populace had spread to its ruling elite, and Ta'li'n knew there was no way he could stitch the Council together any more than he could avert the coming catastrophe. So he set about on his own course, quietly procuring as many of the sacred talismans as he could, hoping to preserve at least some small part of his culture.

He secured the amulet of Pe'x'r, goddess of fertility, a necklace of polished obsidian chips strung on a fine gold strand; barren women wore the necklace for seven days and seven nights, and their husbands made love to them on the seventh and last night, planting the seed that invariably took root where none could grow before. He acquired, discreetly, the cloak of Ya'n'l, god of springtime, of renewal, a god known also in Oaxaca as Xipe Totec; at the spring rites, Ta'li'n often wore this cloak himself, helping to celebrate and honor the renewal of the land. And he obtained the small golden figurine of Qo't'l, the fat god, bringer of luck and prosperity, entrusted for times to families beset by death or ill omen: the small figure squatted on the hearth of the accursed family, speaking, it was said, in its own tongue to the spirits of misfortune that plagued the home, convincing the demons to move elsewhere.

Each of the relics and talismans still possessed the power invested in them at the time of their creation, when they were kissed by the breath of the gods on the hot, dry ceremonial platforms lining the central avenue. Ta'li'n tested each one before he locked them away in a chest in his private chambers.

Pe'x'r, Ya'n'l, Qo't'l, X'l'o — all the major deities were represented, save X'la'n, the plumed serpent, whose talismans were beyond even Ta'li'n's political authority; and some of the more recent, and more sanguinary, additions to the pantheon, like Za'd'e', god of the curved knife, and H'ue'na, god of medicine and health, healing and well-being. For this last talisman, the priest would have to seek out the healer, Ch'at'l — and for that reason

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he suspected that procuring this one would be almost as difficult as obtaining the serpent's. If not more so.

The Shrine Auditorium was packed to capacity tonight, as it was each night, three times a week; Jackie peered out from the wings, holding back the curtain to make the narrowest of slits through which to see the crowd. It never failed to amaze him, the size and the reverence of the audience, the low whispers in which they spoke, as though afraid to speak too loudly their hopes and hurts; and it never failed to frighten him, either, as he scanned the line of supplicants, noting their disabilities or deformities, wondering at those whose afflictions were not readily apparent, and realizing that they had come here to see *him* — that for most of them, he was their last best hope, their final recourse along a torturous path of pain and disappointment.

Tonight he saw three people in wheelchairs, one ravaged by the blight of Lou Gehrig's disease, the other two paralyzed from the neck down; behind them stood a small girl, thin, emaciated, with no hair, obviously the result of a chemotherapy or radiation treatment that had not worked; and half a dozen men and women with the gaunt, wasted looks of AIDS victims. Jackie knew that for every one of these sufferers who would leave tonight weeping with joy at their miraculous recovery, there would be at least two who would leave disappointed, or buoyed with false hope; the stone was not, he had learned, infallible, and it was difficult to predict which ailment or which sufferer would be healed by it. To date, Jackie had failed to cure anyone of AIDS, and had only arrested, not eliminated, the growth of several cancers — turning malignant tumors to benign, and at least one case of leukemia into remission. Viral and neoplasmic diseases like these were most resistant to the stone's power; it had better luck dealing with simpler, though no less crippling, ailments, as though those were the ones it was originally designed to treat: bacterial infections, metabolic and nutritional diseases, "mechanical" trauma caused by physical injury — paralysis, muscular and skeletal damage. The stone could cure arthritis, but not MS; gangrene, but not, say, chemical poisoning. . . .

Like that first day, six months ago; that first morning in Lafayette Park, when a scared, nervous Jackie had shuffled into the park, stood on an outcropping of rock, and, the stone hidden in one hand, began calling out to the homeless people scattered — sleeping, eating, talking to one another

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or talking to themselves — around the park. "My name is John," he told them, using a name he had not heard since his mother died, years before, "and if you're hurting, I can help you." They thought he was a nut case, of course, at first, and ignored him — until one old woman, perhaps not dealing with a full deck herself, stumbled up and asked if he could do anything for the bursitis in her left hip. Jackie gently put a hand to her hip — so tiny and frail he was almost afraid to apply too much pressure —palmed the stone, keeping his hand behind him so no one might see the glow as he closed his eyes, trying to will this woman well again. . . .

And succeeded. And then, all at once, it seemed, they were upon him: battered, hurting people with arthritis, or cataracts, or emphysema, and so busy was he in healing them that he didn't notice until an hour into his labors that there were now news cameras trained on him, videotape whirring away and a news van from Channel 11 parked on Wilshire Boulevard . . . brought there, Jackie later discovered, by an anonymous tip from Harry. He'd called all the local stations, and though the three network affiliates ignored him, independent KTTV had sent a team; as soon as the cameras started grinding, Harry was there, shepherding the supplicants as he would do on a much larger scale later on: "Brother John will see you all," he'd said, Jackie hearing the designation for the first time; "Wait your turn, sisters, brothers, wait your turn. . . ."

Jackie wasn't comfortable with the title, nor with the religious trappings of all this — the Church of the Brotherhood, as they came to call it — but Harry had convinced him that it was the only way the public could accept what he was doing. It was probably the shrewdest move of Faulk's career: after the recent, bitter disappointments and breaches of trust by so many evangelists and faith healers, at the appearance of one who could actually *deliver* — one whose results were, in fact, verified by baffled physicians — people flocked to Brother John, happy to finally find one man of God worthy of their faith. And Jackie had to admit he liked it; for a man who had never in his life been treated with even the most minimal respect, this newfound adoration was . . . intoxicating.

"Jac— John?" Harry's voice behind him. He turned, amused as always to see Harry looking so respectable in his smartly tailored gray three-piece suit. "Better get ready," Harry suggested. "We go to the floor in five minutes."

Jackie nodded and went to his dressing room, where a petite young

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woman applied his makeup for him; before leaving, he checked himself in the mirror, impressed at the man he saw reflected back at him: his hair neatly trimmed, his tendency toward five o'clock shadow even at noon artfully concealed by the makeup, his cream-colored suit impeccable and tasteful. For the first time in his life, he could look at himself without the slightest hint of self-disgust, without hearing that inner mocking voice harping at him, belittling him. For the first time in his life, he actually felt proud — of himself, and of what he was doing.

"Brothers . . . sisters. . . ." He could hear Harry, always and ever the advance man, warming up the crowd. ". . . if you think no one cares . . . if you think no one can help you . . . you're wrong."

Jackie left the dressing room, waiting in the wings as Harry finished his introduction, feeling the rush of excitement and anticipation as he listened. "We don't pretend to be infallible," Harry was saying reverently. "That's reserved for a Higher power than ours. But we can try. We can try to take away the pain, and we hope you'll let us." A susurrus of voices from the crowd murmured eager agreement. Harry went on for a while longer, delivering the pious homilies and righteous platitudes the audience seemed to demand, finally concluding with, "My friends, I give you . . . Brother John."

A burst of heartfelt applause greeted Jackie upon his entrance; it never failed to move him, to expunge his doubts and get the adrenalin surging. As usual, Harry had handpicked the line of supplicants that stretched from the lip of the stage, up the aisle, to the back of the auditorium — there were only so many people they could treat in a two-hour telecast —with the simpler cases, the rheumatics, the deaf, the vision-impaired, up front. That way they led the hour with immediate and tangible successes, and by the second hour they could afford the occasional failure or non-visible healing (cancer cures, being internal, didn't make for especially good television). Jackie disliked the artifice of it, but knowing the limitations of the stone, it was necessary . . . though Harry liked it because the more dramatic the cure, the bigger the "love offerings" the next day, and Jackie was constantly fighting to keep the quieter, less showy sufferers on the bill at all.

The first person in line was a classic Faulk choice; yet the moment he saw her, Jackie could hardly fault Harry for it. She was a ten-year-old girl, with pretty green eyes and limp blondé hair, sitting in a wheelchair; be-

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hind her, her mother hovered nervously, her eyes pathetically searching Jackie's face as he turned to them — a silent, desperate plea that Jackie had come to know only too well. He purposely averted his gaze from the mother, squatting down to look in the little girl's eyes; she looked self-conscious, embarrassed, but had none of her mother's reek of desperation.

"Hi," he said softly. His body mike picked up even the faintest of whispers and made them echo in the vast auditorium.

"Hello," the girl replied tentatively.

"I'm John. What's your name?"

"Amanda," the girl said with a shy smile.

"How long have you been in that chair, Amanda?" Jackie asked gently.

The mother answered for her: "Almost three years, Brother John. She was . . . hit by a car. They never did find the driver. . . ."

Yes, of course. Multiple sclerosis, muscular dystrophy — they were more problematic; Jackie's success rate with them was low. Harry would never put one of them on first. Simple spinal break — that was better, more potentially dramatic. Jackie sighed inwardly. Right now he didn't care; right now he just wanted to make this little girl well.

"The driver," he told the girl's mother, "will answer to God's judgment. All that concerns us here is Amanda." He reached up, one hand palming the green marbled stone, and laid his hands lightly on her legs. "Don't be afraid," he said, smiling. He slid one hand — the one clenching the stone — behind Amanda's back, touching her spinal column. The stone didn't have to be in contact with the afflicted area to function, but this served to hide its glow from the audience and the camera. They had decided, when they'd made the transition to television, that the glow would seem too phony, give skeptics a chance to claim they were just using fancy video effects — so Jackie either hid the stone, as he was doing now, or covered it with a black felt cloth inside his cupped hand, which damped the glow without diminishing the warmth, the power.

Jackie closed his eyes and began to concentrate. "Dear God," he said softly, "help this child. Help her walk again. . . ." Harry was always trying to get him to make his speeches more flowery, more pious, but the words sounded unnatural to Jackie; *help me* or *help her* seemed sufficient for the occasion. He felt the stone growing hot in his hand, felt the warmth spreading through his glenched fingers, then beyond.

"Mommy," he heard the girl say, "it feels *hot*—"

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Amanda took a step forward, away from her wheelchair, a look of wonder on her face.

"It does?" The mother's voice was full of hope. "Honey, are you sure?"

"God's love is warming her," came Harry's voice, booming and sententious. "Praise be!" The audience chanted in unison: "*Praise be!*" Jackie tried to ignore it, tried to concentrate on nothing but the task before him — for the briefest of instants, he felt something shift, felt something seem to fall into place in Amanda's back, and then the stone began to cool. When the heat was totally dissipated, Jackie opened his eyes. He drew his hand from behind her back, pretending to wipe perspiration on his jacket, but in reality pocketing the stone; then he took the girl's hands in his, smiled, and began to stand. "Stand with me, honey," he said gently. "You can do it."

The girl came to her feet tentatively . . . Jackie let go of her hands . . . and she stood. Unaided. The audience cheered. Amanda took a step forward, away from her wheelchair, a look of wonder and delight on her face. The audience roared. "Praise God!" Harry shouted. "*Praise God!*" the crowd bellowed back, filling the auditorium with their cheers. The mother embraced her daughter, and then the daughter, spontaneously, ran to Jackie and hugged him round his waist. Jackie, genuinely moved and pleased, stroked the girl's hair—

Only to find Harry, a moment later, hustling the little girl and her mother offstage as quickly as possible, to make way for the next supplicant. . . .

At the end of the evening, an exhausted Jackie left the stage to wild applause and exuberant cries: "We love you, Brother!" they shouted, and Jackie felt drained but happy, depleted but exultant. "Praise the Lord!" Then, finally, Harry took the podium to deliver his fund-raising pitch: "On behalf of Brother John, thank you for coming tonight. And those of you watching at home — won't you take a moment to count the blessings in your life, and perhaps share some of them with others? Anything you can give, to do the work He has charged us with, would be deeply appreciated. God bless you all, and good night."

That night and the next morning, the phones in the church's small offices off Cahuenga Boulevard rang incessantly with credit-card pledges, even as an overworked staff opened letters containing checks, money orders,

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dollar bills, and sometimes even pennies from a child's piggy bank.

Jackie had his misgivings about all this, but the fact was, it did cost money to rent the Shrine, lease video equipment, hire technicians, and, most expensive of all, purchase airtime on the 250 TV stations across the country that carried the program. By now Harry and Jackie had moved from their dive on Fountain to a pair of pleasant townhouses just above Sunset; to Jackie the modest condos were palaces, but Faulk, it developed, took a broader view.

The day after the broadcast, Harry drove his new white Baby Mercedes down Sunset to an office building a few blocks east of Vine. It was a twenty-story, steel-and-glass tower, and Jackie thought they were going there to a restaurant for lunch; but the elevator instead delivered them onto a deserted floor filled with empty offices, plush carpeting, and stacks of boxes containing what seemed to be personal computers, phone systems, and office equipment. "Welcome," Harry announced, "to the new headquarters of the Church of the Brotherhood."

Jackie's jaw dropped. He'd put all the financial dealings in Harry's hands, but *this*— "The whole *floor*!" he said with quiet astonishment.

"Five floors," Harry corrected him, "and the penthouse. C'mon. Let's take a look at our new home."

Numbly, Jackie followed him to the three-thousand-square-foot penthouse that perched atop the tower. This was in better array than the offices downstairs; Jackie followed, dazed, as Harry led him through a home the like of which he had never imagined he'd see in this life-time. There was a huge living room with a three-cornered, sixty-foot wall of windows overlooking the city: to the east the mirrored facade of the Bonaventure Hotel, five glassy cylinders dwarfed by even higher structures, gleamed in the afternoon haze; to the west, Beverly Hills sprawled lazily from Sunset to Pico, stands of palm trees marching down wide, immaculate streets; west of that the sleek towers of Century City shimmered in the heat and the smog, seeming, in tandem with the skyscrapers of downtown, to bracket the Basin.

Off the living room was a formal dining room already furnished with sleek Scandinavian tables, chairs, and hutch; beyond that a state-of-the-art, fully equipped kitchen with three microwaves and a cooking island the size of Catalina; down a T-shaped corridor, a cluster of four bedroom suites. Harry's and Jackie's were at opposite ends of the corridor, each one

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enormous, with breathtaking city views, full baths, and small kitchenettes.

Jackie sank, stunned, onto the soft king-size bed in his room, but Harry grinned and pulled him to his feet. "Tour's not over yet," he said, leading Jackie to a private elevator that took them to the roof — and an Olympic-sized swimming pool surrounded on all sides by majestic views of the city.

"Jesus, Harry," Jackie said softly. "We're not actually going to *live* here?"

"Why not? 'Appearances'? It's legitimate — we use five floors for office space. And the rest — hell, who's going to begrudge a few luxuries to a man who's helped so many people?"

Jackie felt uncomfortable; he didn't know whether he wanted to be convinced or not. "Why do we need so much money?" he asked. "Ninety percent of the people who contribute won't even be able to get on the show, just by sheer weight of numbers. Not that the stone could handle so many, anyway, but—"

"I'll give you one very good reason we need so much money, my friend," Harry said soberly. "You and I, we don't have the cleanest of slates in the world. You have any idea how many of our old pals from Vacaville have turned up lately? In need of funds?"

Jackie started. "You've been paying blackmail?"

"Pin money. Most of them are so stupid they ask for a hundred thousand. I bargain them down to fifty; they go away happy. It's the reporters who're more savvy; they ask for more, and I have to deliver."

"Oh shit, Harry, maybe we should forget this whole—"

"Don't be an idiot. This *was* your idea, wasn't it? *You* wanted to heal people, right?"

"Yeah, but — all this — it doesn't seem—"

"Fair?" Harry said. "For a man who's made cripples walk . . . made the blind see . . . the deaf hear? Why the hell shouldn't you have a few creature comforts? After all the shitholes you've lived in, after all the good you've done in the past year — you're telling me you don't deserve a decent *home*, for the first time in your miserable life?"

Jackie wavered. In that moment of hesitation, Harry put a hand to his back, started walking him along the pool, the two of them taking in the city below. "Besides," he said, "I think we can eliminate the danger of extortion, with a little grease applied to the right wheels. Our records, our convictions, our downtime — the only place it really exists is in the state computers, right?"

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Jackie began to see where this was going. "You want to bribe somebody to go in and wipe out our records? How the hell much will *that* cost?"

"Not as much as you'd think," Harry smiled. "I've done a little checking. Seems the deputy commissioner of prisons for the state of California has a wife with cancer. Terminal. I think a deal could be struck. . . ."

Jackie said nothing. He looked out across the dazzling blue swimming pool, toward downtown; from up here, that night in the alley — all the nights in all the alleys — seemed utterly remote. He felt safe. When was the last time he'd felt safe? He couldn't remember. He didn't care. Harry was talking about profit margins and satellite time and promotional items. He listened to Harry, he nodded, and he did not protest.

The healer lived in a dwelling identical to those of the majority of the City's inhabitants: single-story, white-walled buildings of adobe brick, each compound containing some thirty apartments clustered around a central atrium; there were no windows in any of the apartments, but no walls facing the center court, either, only hanging curtains that most of the day remained open, admitting sunlight into the comfortable rooms. At the entrance to the compound, a doorkeeper greeted Ta'li'n with a solemn nod, respectfully stepping aside to let him pass. The laughter of children carried out on a gust of wind, and the priest felt a twinge of pain, knowing how soon that laughter was to end.

Most courtyards had at their center a small brick temple, a miniature of the ones atop the great pyramids, each one adorned with the likeness or symbols of a particular god; this one, understandably enough, was an altar to H'ue'na, god of medicine. Around the fringes of the atrium, small children chased each other, laughed and giggled; at the priest's approach, they hushed momentarily, but as he made his way to Ch'at'l's apartment, they quickly resumed their games.

Outside the healer's room — its curtain drawn, for the moment —some half a dozen people lingered in a casual line, each injured in some way, or visibly ill. Ta'li'n hesitated, weighing the extent of their afflictions; but told himself he could not let that sway him. He pushed aside the curtain and entered the healer's apartment.

Ch'at'l was seated on a pillow in the middle of the sparsely furnished room, eyes closed in concentration, his left hand on the stomach of a woman who looked to be about five months pregnant. The room was lit

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only by candlelight, but even in the dimness the priest could see a distinctive glow — a pure white pulsing light that spilled out from between the fingers of the healer's right hand. He seemed not to notice Ta'li'n's entrance, or if he did, paid it no mind. The priest kept a respectful silence, watching the old man for some moments, then letting his gaze drift to the bright frescoes painted on the plaster walls: pictures of running children, laughing women, crying infants, strong and vibrant men. Ta'li'n had almost forgotten how uniquely beautiful the healer's quarters were; each apartment was adorned with similar murals, but Ch'at'l's burst with life and health and light, even in this semidarkness.

After several minutes the glow in Ch'at'l's hand subsided, and the healer opened his eyes and nodded with satisfaction. "The child will be fine," he told the woman, who exhaled a long breath of relief. "The birth canal was twisted; askew. It is repaired. The birth will occur, now, unimpeded."

The woman hugged him gratefully, and as they stood, Ta'li'n saw how small the old man was — perhaps five feet tall, with browned, leathery skin taut over the brittle skeleton. If height were a measure of authority, Ta'li'n would have no problem fulfilling his task. But not even the authority vested in him by his robes was sufficient to intimidate this frail old man.

The woman left the room, and only then did Ch'at'l look up to greet his visitor. "Most Holy. Good day," he said with deceptive humility. "Is there an ailment that plagues you? How may I help?"

Ta'li'n found himself straightening, mustering as much authority as he was able. "No ailment," he said. "I — have need of the stone."

The old man blinked his large black eyes, eyes set deep in a lined and furrowed face; his bald head seemed somehow too large for his frail body. "I do not understand," he said, but something in his tone made the priest feel that he did understand, that he was somehow expecting this. "If there is no ailment, why, then, do you have need of the stone?"

"The Council," Ta'li'n lied, "requires it for a ceremony. It will be returned to you when we are done."

"I am not to join in this . . . ceremony?"

"No."

The healer looked at him with those black penetrating eyes. "I have been entrusted with this stone," he said quietly, opening his hand to

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reveal the green marbled stone in his palm, "for over sixty years, and not once has it left my sight." He met the priest's gaze evenly. "I do not take my trust lightly."

"No. No, of course not," Ta'li'n said quickly. "But it is but for a short while, and will be returned to you as soon as—" He groped for a convincing falsehood. "—as soon as we are able," he concluded lamely.

"But what of those in need of it?" the healer asked, nodding toward outside. toward the waiting line of ill and injured. "How long must they suffer?"

Ta'li'n was growing more frustrated and impatient. Damn the old man for his stubbornness. "It is not our intent that *anyone* suffer," he said, taking a step forward, raising his voice, "but we *must* have the stone. You are directed to give it to me, in the name of—"

The old man took a step forward, raising his hand in a placating gesture before the priest could invoke any deities. "High One — please," he said quietly. "I know why you need it. You need not dissemble."

Ta'li'n bristled at the old man's impiety, accurate though it was. "How dare you suggest that I—"

"You are not the only one," Ch'at'l said simply, "to whom the peyote sings its sad chorale."

Ta'li'n started. The healer moved slowly to a table crowded with urns and bottles, all filled with various herbs and roots; he took the lid off one jade bottle, drawing out a small white mescal cap. Ta'li'n stared at it in disbelief. The old man hobbled toward him, the tiny white cap held aloft on the tip of one small, bony finger. He smiled.

"Teotihuacán," he said, and the priest flinched as though at an insect's bite. "That is what they will call us in the time to come, is it not?"

The priest nodded dully, taken completely off-guard. The healer smiled again, but there was no trace of mockery in it, just a gentle reassurance. "I know what is to come," he said, "and I know what you are trying to do. And when the time is right, I shall give you the stone. But in the meantime there are many ailments to be seen to, and many sufferings to be eased."

Ta'li'n frowned ruefully. "Only to die," he said in a low voice, "along with the City."

"Not all of them," Ch'at'l said. "The City will die, but many will escape. Who can say that a fractured bone I repair today will not carry a man out

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of the City? With perhaps a woman or a child, in his arms?"

Ta'li'n hesitated, but the healer put a hand reassuringly on his arm. "When the time comes," he said again, "it will be yours. I promise." A hint of mischief gleamed in Ch'at'l's eyes. Or don't you trust me?"

The priest smiled, for perhaps the first time in days. "After sixty years," he sighed bemusedly, "who am I to begin to doubt?"

The old man laughed, then hobbled over to draw back the curtain and admit his next patient.

The wife of the deputy commissioner of prisons had a malignant tumor in her left lung, and, according to the latest magnetic resonance scan, the cancer had begun to metastasize to her right lung and upper colon. Despite his worries over the stone's spotty success in dealing with cancers, Jackie did his best, half out of concern for the woman — she was only forty-one but looked nearly sixty: drawn, haggard, wearing an obvious wig to hide the effects of chemo and radiation treatments — and half out of concern for himself, and Harry. If this worked, they would be beyond blackmail; if it failed, who was to say that the commissioner himself might not expose them, out of bitterness and disappointment? Jackie did his usual number, the stone covered in black cloth to hide the glow, did the laying on of hands, and, for the next three days, waited anxiously for the results of new tests from Cedars-Sinai.

On the morning of that Friday's taping, the word came in from Cedars; the growth of the tumor in the left lung had been arrrested, and the cancer in the right lung and colon had similarly been halted. She wasn't cured, but she was in remission — and that was enough for her grateful husband. Within twenty-four hours, all traces of Faulk's and Thompson's criminal records — arrests, convictions, detentions — had been expunged, neatly, from the state computer system.

Jackie was surprised at the extent of relief he felt upon hearing the news; amazed at the sense of freedom it brought him. Even before Harry had told him about the extortion, a part of him had worried, every time he stepped onto that stage, that someone, anyone, everyone would see through the neatly tailored suit and the salon-trimmed hair, to the frightened second-story man beneath. Now he went onstage and felt only confidence, and pride, when the crowd cheered at his entrance, or when he made a lame girl walk, or a deaf man hear. He was growing to like that

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sound, that applause and adulation, more and more —

And, conversely, coming to hate the awkward silence and unspoken disappointment when it *didn't* work — when the young man with MS *didn't* get up from his wheelchair and dance a little jig, when the AIDS victim's sores did not heal on the spot and the emphysema sufferer failed to stop coughing and gasping for air. Jackie came to hate those moments, wanted less and less to hear that disillusioned silence and more and more the cheers and approbation.

So when Harry decided to allow no more AIDS victims on the broadcast, Jackie readily agreed. When Harry continued to front-load the program with simpler afflictions that made for more dramatic cures, Jackie no longer objected. And when Faulk began screening the supplicants more carefully, weeding out the cancer and leukemia sufferers — not because there was no chance at saving them, but because even if they were cured, it was impossible to see on the spot, because it didn't make for good *television* — Jackie kept his silence. They still took on the occasional private patient with cancer, of course, and when the results were positive, trumpeted them to the press; the failures were smoothed over with large monetary donations to the deceased's family. Tax-deductible.

The streamlined program was cut to ninety minutes, but broadcast, via satellite now, four times a week instead of three; the net effect was approximately the same number of people healed, but an increase in profit margin. The Church of the Brotherhood quickly expanded to fill all five floors that Faulk had rented; donations increased by 55 percent over the next six months, bringing in an average of $115 million a year; competing evangelists chafed over the inroads the church had made into their congregations, but could not find anything on the order of a Swaggart or Bakker scandal to discredit or dethrone the new king of televangelism.

Harry was very careful not to give them any ammunition, either. Brother John's penthouse home was expensively, but not opulently, furnished; most of the luxuries in which Jackie indulged himself could reasonably be called deductible: state-of-the-art video and audio equipment, spa and gym facilities (how could Brother John be expected to heal others if he didn't take care of his own body?), and an abundance of foods Jackie never had the money to even taste before (with Faulk aways careful to donate a fraction of what they spent on food for themselves to some charity

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for the homeless and hungry]. Compared to Jim and Tammy's onetime Disneyland, it all seemed positively modest.

As for women, Harry screened the supplicants very carefully for potential entertainment purposes: disfigured or crippled women were especially grateful when John's healing touch wiped away the scars that had made them feel like pariahs, or reawakened feeling in parts of their bodies long numb with paralysis. Such women were uncommonly thankful and loyal, and unlikely to sell their stories to the *Enquirer* — especially after being feted and gifted with jewelry, clothes, and cars.

Jackie no longer asked why they needed to make so much money. Jackie no longer asked any questions, to speak of. He was content to revel in the love and applause of the audience, and in the comforts that that love provided. He was still doing good, after all — wasn't he? And wasn't that what mattered, in the end?

They were going over last-minute scheduling details for that evening's telecast, when the intercom in Jackie's inner office buzzed. "Brother John?" came his secretary's voice, rich and mellow. "There's someone here to see you. He doesn't have an appointment, but he says his name is — Joseph Rubello?"

Jackie exchanged a quick, startled look with Harry.

"Son of a bitch," said Faulk, a nasty smile coming to him slowly. "You going to see him?"

Jackie considered a moment, then smiled back.

"Why not?" he allowed generously. But when his finger toggled the intercom, there were the beginnings of a satisfied, and not altogether pleasant, smile on his lips. "Send him in, Bobbi," he said, settling in behind his wide teakwood desk; Harry perched on the arm of a sofa across the room, looking like an owl about to watch a kill from the safety of a tree limb.

Bobbi ushered Rubello into the inner office, then discreetly shut the door behind her; Jackie rose from his seat and extended a hand to the visitor. Twenty years ago, in his prime, Joseph Rubello had been a physically powerful man, broad, square-shouldered, barrel-chested; even now, in his late 50s, with more fat than muscle, his was still a commanding presence, though one tempered by age, infirmity, and . . . something else. Something that Jackie had never seen in him before; something like fear.

"Jackie," he said with a near genuine heartiness; his grip was weaker

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than Jackie remembered it — not that Rubello had ever had much call to shake Jackie's hand before. "Good to see you. *Really* good. . . ."

"Been a while, hasn't it, Joe?" Jackie agreed. He had never called him "Joe" before; if the old man was affronted, he didn't show it.

"Yeah, must be, what, five, six years . . . ?"

"Eleven," Jackie said evenly. "Last I heard from you, your thugs put me in the hospital for botching a delivery for you. You sent flowers and a card. Thoughtful as hell."

Rubello paled, then laughed nervously.

"Hey . . . Jackie. That's history. I mean, c'mon, eleven years; you're not gonna hold that against me, are you?"

"John," said the younger man suddenly.

"What?"

"It's John. My name is John now. Not Jackie."

"Oh. Sure. John." Rubello glanced appreciatively around Jackie's office. "Sweet little place you've got here."

He wasn't here for blackmail — that much Jackie was certain of; his demeanor would be entirely different. And surely, with his contacts, Rubello knew that digging up evidence for extortion would be nearly impossible now. That left only one possible reason for this visit.

"Something I can . . . do . . . for you, Joe?" Jackie asked quietly.

Rubello looked him square in the eye, and Jackie saw not just that glimmer of fear again, but the sweet complement of desperation, and need. "You . . . you really can do what they say?" he said. "It's not some kind of scam?"

Jackie smiled. He nodded.

"I can do it," he said. Then, with a trace of amusement in his voice: "What is it, Joe? Cancer? All those Honduran cigars catching up with you?"

Rubello hesitated — Jackie could almost see the struggle inside him, his dignity warring with his desperation — then took a short breath and shook his head. "Atherosclerosis," he said. "I had quadruple bypass surgery last year, cleared out two of the arteries, but I—" He winced slightly. "I had another heart attack six months ago. Nearly died. Just a matter of time till the next one."

"All that high living and rich food, eh, Joe?" Faulk said, speaking for the first time. Rubello glanced at him, a flicker of disgust crossing his face, then quickly gone as he nodded tightly. "Yeah," he said, swallowing his pride. "I guess so."

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Jackie breathed a silent sigh of relief. Just an excess of fat cells, clogging his arteries and blood vessels; a nutritional disease, not a viral one, nothing the stone couldn't tackle handily. Rubello turned from Faulk, looked pleadingly at Jackie.

"Ja — John," he said quietly. "Please. Anything you want, just name it. A blank check. Hundred, two hundred thousand dollars . . . whatever it takes, it's yours."

But Jackie stood his ground, voice flat, gaze cold, as he stared at the older man.

"You treated me like shit, Joe. Like you treated all your runners. Like you treat everybody. And now you want me to cure you . . . give you another ten, twenty years to go *on* treating people like shit?" Jackie shook his head, started out from behind his desk with a quick nod to Faulk. "C'mon, Harry. We tape in another couple of—"

Rubello blocked his path, as Jackie knew he would. His lower lip trembled with rage and fear; his voice was disdainful and imploring at the same time. "What do you want me to do, Jackie? 'Scuse me — *John*. You want me to beg?"

Jackie gave him a chill smile. "That'd be nice."

There was a long pause, then Rubello nodded once and said, "O.K. Revenge. I can understand that. Maybe I'd do the same thing. Maybe I deserve it. O.K., Jackie — I'm *begging* you. Help me. You want me to get down on my knees? I'll do it. I don't care. I want to *live*."

Jackie considered a long moment, then nodded with satisfaction.

"O.K., Joe," he said offhandedly. "That's fine. That, and, say, one million ought to do it."

Rubello paled. "One *million*! Are you out of your—"

"Price just went up. One million five."

"Jackie, for God's sake—"

"Two million. I've got overhead, Joe, serious overhead."

At that, finally, Rubello caved in; the resistance seemed to leave him in a rush, like air from a slashed tire. "All right," he said hoarsely. "Two million. Just *do* it, goddammit. *Do it!*"

Jackie smiled with satisfaction. "Sit down," he said, nodding toward the chair opposite Jackie's desk; while Rubello's face was turned, Jackie palmed the stone, wrapped in its black velvet cocoon, then went to Rubello, put his other hand over the old man's heart, and closed his eyes.

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The stone became warm in Jackie's hand — but not very. Something was wrong; it was far cooler than it should have been, cooler than Jackie had yet felt it. The past several weeks, he'd noticed, the stone's heat had been gradually lessening, but he'd attributed that to overuse — had deliberately skipped the taping before tonight's, in fact, to give it a rest. But now he saw that it had not helped. It felt about as warm as a cup of tea, rapidly cooling to room temperature.

He didn't tell Rubello this, of course; and, a day later, when Rubello called joyously to tell him that the latest blood test showed an actual *decrease* in the number of fat cells in his system, he graciously accepted the mobster's thanks, as well as the $2 million "love offering" that was messengered over that afternoon.

But all through the taping the night before, Jackie had felt the stone growing less and less warm . . . until, halfway through the program, he surreptitiously ditched the velvet cloak, thinking that perhaps that was inhibiting the stone's powers, and risked using it in his bare hand, risked exposing the glow. But there *was* no glow, to speak of; only a faint glimmer of light that people onstage could easily have mistaken for stage lights, and which was too dim to be picked up by the TV cameras.

Two weeks later Jackie opened his morning paper to find a grainy photo of Joseph Rubello staring up at him beneath a twenty-point headline reading REPUTED MAFIA CHIEFTAIN DEAD OF HEART ATTACK.

One day later a pale and shaken Harry Faulk entered Jackie's inner office and announced shakily that the wife of the deputy commissioner of prisons had died the night before, of lung cancer.

THE END, when it came, came quicker than Ta'li'n could have imagined; for all his prescience, it caught him unawares, and threathened to unravel his carefully woven plans.

He had known the final conflagration would occur sometime that spring, but had not guessed that it would arrive on the very first day, in the very middle of the Rites of Renewal. He himself stood on the main ceremonial platform in the middle of the Avenue of the Dead; he himself wore the cloak of Ya'n'l and spoke the sacred words of celebration and rebirth, all the while gazing out at the parched and blistered valley of Tenan, his own voice ringing hollow in his ears. He did not notice until he looked down that a fight had erupted in the crowded street; he watched

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with horror as combatant pushed combatant, as attackers jostled onlookers, drawing them into the melee — as the violence rippled across the face of the crowd until the congregation had become a mob, and the ceremony a riot. Ta'li'n tried to continue, tried to shout the ritual words over the din of battle, but from deep inside the fray came a chant that drowned him out: *The old gods are dead. The old gods are dead!* The Priests' Guards were pushing into the crowd, shields and atlatls raised, trying to separate the combatants, but succeeding only in being forced into the fight themselves as daggers, spears, and knives were thrust at them.

"Stop it," Ta'li'n shouted, trying to make himself heard above the din. *"Stop—"*

Suddenly one of the fighters — a boy of no more than nineteen — launched himself at the ceremonial platform, scrambling up its wooden foundation, screaming obscenities at the priest. Another young man joined him; they hoisted themselves up onto the platform, blood in their eyes, the priest the object of their imminent violence—

But a contingent of Guards had already surrounded Ta'li'n and was hurrying him down the steps to safety, even as other Guards battled the rebels who had desecrated the platform. The phalanx of soldiers surrounding Ta'li'n pushed their way through the crowd, rectangular shields warding off the thrust of daggers and knives, forging safe passage; dazed, stunned, and despairing, the priest saw that nearly everyone in the crowd was now armed — daggers, obsidian blades, atlatls — and in the distance he could see the first awful flicker of torches being lit. . . .

The Guards were steering him toward what they believed to be the sanctuary of the temple atop the Pyramid of the Sun, but the priest commanded them otherwise: "Not the temple. Take me to Ch'at'l. Take me *now!*"

They protested, but he insisted; and soon he found himself back at Ch'at'l's apartment compound, only this time no doorkeeper greeted him, and inside, in the central court, the laughter of children had been replaced with the moans of the injured, or dying: dozens of wounded lay bleeding on the tile floor, or sat hunched in corners, holding themselves and whispering soft prayers. Ta'li'n had not fully comprehended the extent of the riot, the depth of its violence, until this moment; the injured looked up at his entrance, reaching out to him as though the gods' power would pass from him to them, healing their wounds — but aside from the priest's murmured prayers and words of comfort for them, the only significant

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mark of his passage through the atrium were the bloody streaks staining his stark white robes. He was helpless to aid them; and now, he knew, he was about to take away the only thing that *might*. . . .

He entered the healer's quarters, and drew a short breath of surprise: it, too, was crowded with injured people. Ch'at'l was at the far end of the room, kneeling beside a semi-conscious young woman; he was force-feeding her a liquid Ta'li'n recognized as an herbal remedy for concussion. Cries of pain were a constant background noise, but even the quiet rustling of the curtains caught Ch'at'l's attention; he looked over, saw the priest standing awkwardly in the middle of the room, and without hesitation nodded toward a young man with a bleeding wound in the chest. "Tend to him," he said, pressing the priest into service. "I must keep this woman conscious, but his wounds are just as severe."

"How—?" Ta'li'n began — and was startled when the healer pressed the green marble stone into his palm, then half-pushed the priest toward the injured man.

"You have used it before," Ch'at'l said, returning to the young woman.

"Yes," Ta'li'n said, albeit uncertainly. When first initiated into the holy order, Ta'li'n had learned how to use all the charms and talismans of the gods — but as he'd risen into the ranks of the priest-rulers, such practice grew less and less frequent. He prayed to X'l'o that he still remembered how. He knelt beside the young man, grasping the stone in one hand, placing his other on the gaping chest wound—

And recognized the injured man — *boy* — as one of the rebels who had incited today's riot . . . one of the proponents of the New, the one who had tried, dagger in hand, to climb the ceremonial platform and attack Ta'li'n. The priest paled, trying to ignore the tangle of conflicting emotions he felt, and shut his eyes. He concentrated on healing the wound, on stanching the flow of blood; he tried to visualize arteries mending, blood vessels closing, slashed flesh knitting together—

But the stone was not getting warmer, as he knew it should have been. He redoubled his efforts, but the stone remained cold in his fist. *Fist.* Yes. That was the problem, wasn't it? He opened his eyes and saw that the young man's wound was still bleeding profusely; he had had no effect on it whatsoever. And then he felt someone brushing him aside, prying the stone from his stiff fingers.

Ch'at'l took the stone from the priest, placed his hand on the young

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man's chest, and shook his head. "The eye cannot heal," the old man said without apparent rancor, "what the heart cannot see."

Ta'li'n watched as the stone began to glow white-hot in the healer's hands. He lowered his gaze. "Were I truly the holy man I profess to be," the priest said, ashamed, "I would be able to care for my enemies as I do for my fellows."

But Ch'at'l merely shook his head. "You are a man," he said with no recrimination. "All men have their limits." He took his hand away from the rebel's chest, and Ta'li'n saw that the blood had stopped and the wound had begun to heal. But the healer did not seem particularly happy; he looked around the crowded room, at the suffering and injury, with great sad eyes. "Even as I," he said softly, "have *my* limits. . . ."

"No one can heal an entire city," Ta'li'n said gently, "dying like a frightened beast in the night."

The old man looked up at him, his eyes now veiled. "The time has come?"

Ta'li'n nodded silently.

The healer hesitated only a moment, then, with a quick nod, put the stone back into the priest's hand — standing up as he did. "Go," he said, returning to the young woman and her herbal medicine. "Save what you can . . . while I save what *I* can."

Ta'li'n turned and left, his Guards enclosing him as they left the compound. In the street, people chased and stoned one another, fought each other with sling and dagger and atlatl; they bellowed with rage, cried out in mortal pain, giggled with manic laughter. In the east, Ta'li'n saw the first hot lick of flame appear from behind the Butterfly Palace. He told his Guards to hurry, praying that there was still time — praying to gods who seemed no longer to be listening.

Jackie could feel the stone growing colder and colder with each successive use. Harry was now weeding out all but the simplest, most easily cured ailments from the program: they were reduced to mending broken arms and compressed disks, torn tendons and sprained ankles. And as the more serious and more dramatic cases were shunted off the air, revenues began to dip — not much at first, but by the end of the week, contributions had dropped by 15 percent.

At the same time, people whom Jackie had "healed" within the past

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few months began to appear, their injuries and illnesses abruptly returned, at the Church of the Brotherhood's Hollywood headquarters. Some were desperate; some were pleading. Most became angry and indignant when staffers turned them away and told them there was nothing Brother John could do for them. Hurt, betrayed, they took their complaints to the press. Among these were several women whom either Jackie or Faulk had slept with after being "cured" — and who, their ailments or injuries returned, were eagerly selling their exclusive stories to the *Star* or the *Enquirer*.

Donations plunged by another 35 percent.

The first hard-news story about Brother John and Brother Faulk's prison record broke in the *L.A. Times* a few days later. The reporter, Marnie Eilers, detailed in depth Jackie's history as a second-story man, his conviction for burglary, and Harry's multiple convictions for mail fraud and passing counterfeit money. Apparently, the deputy commissioner of prisons had had the presence of mind to retain a copy of the data when he had wiped the state's mainframe clean — though he'd covered his tracks well enough not to have been caught doing it. One minute the information wasn't there; the next, it was. As quickly as it had been initially expunged.

"Love offerings" bottomed out to nothing.

Harry laid off most of the church staff and was scrambling to liquidate whatever assets he could — Rubello's "family" was demanding restitution of their $2 million, alternately payable in blood — when the bunco squad sought and obtained a court injunction freezing the church's bank account pending investigation of "improprieties." The time had come, Faulk decided, to pack up, cut their losses, and get the hell out of the country before either the IRS or their moral counterpart, the mob, got to them.

Jackie, leaving the building on Sunset for the last time, had to push his way through a crowd of ill and injured, people whose faces he vaguely recalled, but for whom he felt nothing; all he felt was fear and disbelief, stunned astonishment that it had all fallen apart so quickly, so completely. Harry was a few steps ahead, trying to clear a path. "Please — let us through, just let us—"

"Brother John — please—"

"Brother — help me—"

"—you son of a bitch, you *promised*, you—"

"Oh God, Brother, help my boy? you helped him once—"

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Jackie looked up and saw a mother, arms wrapped protectively around an eight-year-old boy. He recognized the boy, dimly, as a mute he'd given voice to, only — what? Two months ago? The last of those whom Jackie had truly, even in part, cared about . . . or the first of those for whom he had not. He felt a stab of guilt, of shame—

The mother stepped in front of him, blocking his path. "Brother John —please—"

"I *can't help* you!" he cried out in anger and frustration. "Leave me *alone!*" He pushed her aside, her and the child both, away from him and into the crowd—

And with the next step he took, he felt a sudden, jolting stab of pain in his abdomen — so intense that he doubled over, crying out in inexplicable agony, hands going to his stomach—

His hands came away smeared with blood.

His blood.

He screamed. With an effort, he straightened, looked down at himself: blood was soaking through his shirt, his once immaculate white suit, a bright red stain growing larger and larger, product of what Jackie knew, instantly, was an open wound.

Those in the crowd closest to him saw the blood and jumped to an understandable — and, in a way, accurate — conclusion: "Oh Jesus," someone shouted, "he's been *shot!* Somebody's shot him!"

The crowd disintegrated into chaos as the former supplicants scattered, rushing to avoid becoming the unseen gunman's next victim; Jackie staggered forward, arm outstretched, imploringly: "No," he managed to choke out, "please — somebody, you've got to help me—"

But no one listened to his pleas; within moments the only person within twenty feet was Harry, who caught Jackie as he began to fall, lowering him onto the sidewalk as the blood continued to gush — staining his pants now, a long red finger running down the inseam to the cuff. "Jackie! What in *hell*—"

Jackie groped in his pocket for the stone, not finding it at first, fighting back a wave of terror until he felt it in his other pocket. He clenched the stone in his right hand, as he had in a deserted alley many months ago; now, as then, he placed his left hand over the wound and closed his eyes. *Oh God,* he thought, *Oh Jesus, I'm sorry, please* help *me.* . . . He concentrated on healing with all the failing strength and faltering will he could muster—

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But when he opened his eyes, he saw the blood flowing from between the fingers of his left hand, and he knew instinctively that this time —this time it wasn't going to work. . . .

He forced the stone into Harry's hand. "You've got to do it," he said, voice a hoarse whisper. "Please, Harry, you've got to do it!" He grabbed Faulk's other hand, put it on the bleeding wound—

Harry recoiled, drawing back his hand in horror and disgust. "Jackie —I can't —"

"Harry, you *have* to!"

"I —" Harry clenched the stone in one hand, working up the nerve to put his hand near the wound again; he was perspiring, clearly terrified. "I don't know *how*, Jackie; I don't —" He suddenly tore his hand away, bolted to his feet, and dropped the stone on the sidewalk beside the injured man. "I *can't*, Jackie!" he cried out, backing away into the building. "I just can't!"

Jackie stared at him disbelievingly, as though seeing him for the first time. "*Harry* . . . ?"

"I'll call an ambulance," Harry promised, and then he was gone, swallowed up in the revolving glass doors to the lobby. Jackie called after, weakly, but to no avail: Harry was gone.

Jackie closed his eyes. An ambulance, he knew, would arrive far too late. He fought back his terror, trying to come to terms with what was happening to him; trying to come to terms with death. Because he *was* going to die this time. He'd been given a second chance, and he'd blown it, pissed it all away — allowed himself to be corrupted, by Harry, by the money, by the applause and the approbation. All right. He blew it. Time to pay the piper; time to accept his due. But God, he was frightened. Suddenly he felt like he was falling into a deep black well, enclosed by a solid darkness with a definite shape, like a tunnel; but far from the white light he'd heard that people saw at the moment of death, he saw only the blackness above him, and below him a fevered babble of voices — the damned, perhaps, crying out in pain, giggling with crazed glee, calling out to greet him, to welcome him to their ranks — yes, he could even feel himself growing warmer, felt a fire growing inside him. He was going to Hell, no two ways about that, and he was — he was —

He was no longer falling. He'd stopped somehow, though the fire inside him continued to grow hotter. And then — abruptly, inexplicably — he felt almost as though he were *rising* again, carried aloft on a hot gust of

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wind, ascending as quickly as he'd been dropping, moments before—

He opened his eyes.

An eight-year-old boy — the mute boy he'd pushed aside, along with his mother, lifetimes ago — was squatting beside him, eyes closed, left hand on Jackie's stomach, right hand pulsing with a hot-white luminescence. His mother stood behind him, looking first anxious, then relieved, as Jackie regained consciousness and began to stir.

He saw, Jackie thought dazedly. *He saw what Harry tried to do — what* Harry couldn't do — and he—

The boy kept his eyes closed until the light ceased to issue from his hand — until the stone cooled — then opened them. Jackie reached down, unbuttoned his shirt. . .

. . . to reveal smooth, unbroken skin, and no blood save that which stained his clothes.

The boy smiled triumphantly, exchanging a silent grin of victory with his mother. And in that moment, Jackie understood. Why the stone had stopped working; where it had all gone wrong. Where *he* had gone wrong. Without even thinking about it, Jackie gently took the stone from the boy . . . held it tight in one hand . . . then cupped his other hand around the boy's throat, covering his larynx. Jackie closed his eyes, concentrated, and felt the stone growing warm in his hand . . . a warmth he hadn't felt this intensely in months. He'd forgotten how good that warmth could feel. After thirty seconds, it began to cool again; Jackie opened his eyes, took his hand away from the boy's throat.

Jackie remembered now the look on the boy's face when he had cured him the first time; remembered the smile that had come to him, the raspy, inchoate sounds the boy had made with his newfound voice. Now that same smile lit up his face, but though his voice was at first raspy from disuse, he had apparently learned something of how to use it in the few short months he had been able to speak.

He looked up at Jackie and said, very slowly and carefully, "Thank you, Brother John," his grin growing broader with the completion of the sentence.

The man in the bloodstained suit tousled the boy's hair and smiled back. "No . . . thank *you*," he said softly. "And please . . . call me Jackie."

He looked up and saw one or two members of the once and former crowd lingering at the end of the block: an old man, Jackie recalled, with

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severe rheumatism, and a young black man with an ulcerated colon. Jackie motioned them to come closer. "Don't be afraid," he said gently. "Come on." He stood, started toward them even as they began to move hesitantly toward him; even as, to Jackie's right, Harry Faulk stepped out of the building, looking absolutely stunned.

"Jackie! Jackie, are you—"

"Jackie paid him no mind, walking past him as though he no longer existed — all his attention on the two injured men who needed his help. He took the old man's gnarled, rheumatic hands in his, and he thought: No; not attention — concern. That was the secret — wasn't it?

From atop the Pyramid of the Sun, Ta'li'n could see the last of the five young priests to whom he had entrusted the sacred talismans making his way up the terraced slopes of the valley of Tenan — far from the flames that were consuming the City, a wall of fire marching down what was now, truly, the Avenue of the Dead. Seared, charred bodies lay strewn in its wake; just ahead of it, onetime rioters fled, sparks blown before them on the hot, dry wind, igniting their clothes, turning the fleeing figures into living torches who ran and stumbled a few feet, a few yards, before falling before the oncoming flames. The Pyramid of the Moon and the Butterfly Palace — the first to feel the touch of the rebels — were no longer temples, but furnaces. Up and down the length of the City, pillars of black smoke rose to touch an uncaring sky; directly below, the heat from the oncoming sheet of flame was peeling the bright red and gold from the plaster facade of the pyramid. Soon it, too, would be engulfed; only Ta'li'n remained in the temple, all others either murdered, immolated, or escaped.

The priest turned away from the open gateway, already feeling the intense heat rising up from below; he retreated to his meditation room, sat, took a last mescal cap from its jar, and ate it, waiting for the peyote to carry him away, even as his five young priests had been carried away —they to safety, and Ta'li'n to a different sort of refuge.

Ta'li'n had chosen them well: young enough not to have become involved in the internecine political warfare among the priest-rulers, yet old enough to be expert at the use of the talismans, and able to pass that expertise on to succeeding generations. Why that was important to him, the priest only dimly understood; he knew, from his visions of time to come, that no memory of him or his people would remain — their names,

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their language, their grand accomplishments, their greatest failures, all would be but blank parchment to those-who-would-follow. Why, then, even bother to preserve the talismans? Why bother to save these relics of a religion that would itself be nothing but a mystery, years from now?

Perhaps simply to remind the future . . . that the past was once the present. That for a time — a brief golden march of centuries — the gods had made their home here; had blessed the City with their love and power, their only remembrance in the form of two jade and gold figurines, a long leathery cloak, an amulet of small obsidian chips on a golden strand, and a green marbled stone polished by the sweat of countless hands and countless healers. Even if no one remembered the rites, the divinations, the sacred words, these small enchantments would serve to remind that once, for a time, the gods had lingered here . . . in this place, in this City . . . before moving on.

The smell of smoke now filled the temple, intruding even into Ta'li'n's meditation room; once it filled with the noxious black flames, he would die very quickly. Now he cast out with his mind one last time, his soul riding the crest of the peyote, searching — longing — for some glimpse of the talismans in the days to come, some affirmation that his actions had had meaning. Eyes closed, images raced through his mind: the City, bleached of color and life; a woman — Mayan, perhaps — the necklace of Pe'x'r round her neck, life stirring in her womb; a park —

A park surrounded by tall structures — taller than even the tallest pyramid, roadways of some smooth black material ringing the island of grass and trees —

And a man. Dark hair, dark eyes, dressed in what looked like holy white — but a white streaked, oddly, with red; with blood. Like Ta'li'n's own robes. The thin, wiry young man knelt beside an older, injured man — an indigent of some sort — one hand on the man's chest, the other glowing with a pulsing white light that made Ta'li'n nod in recognition. The image, the glimpse, was gone within seconds — but as the air grew hotter around him, and the first gray fingers of smoke slipped beneath the door to the room, the priest smiled, content in the affirmation that his legacy had/would/did survive; secure in the knowledge that this small part of it, at least, was, somehow, in good hands.

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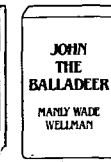

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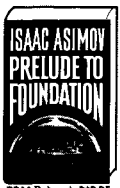

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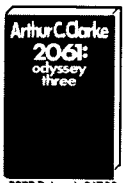

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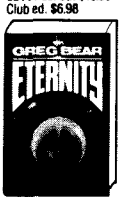

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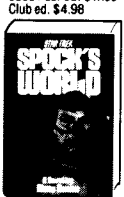

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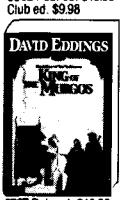

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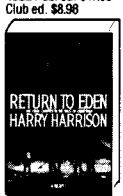

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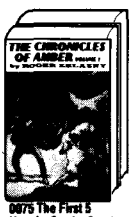

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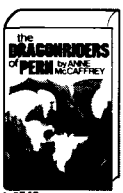

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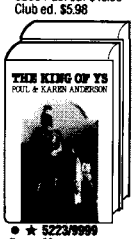

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